38th Anniversary Issue

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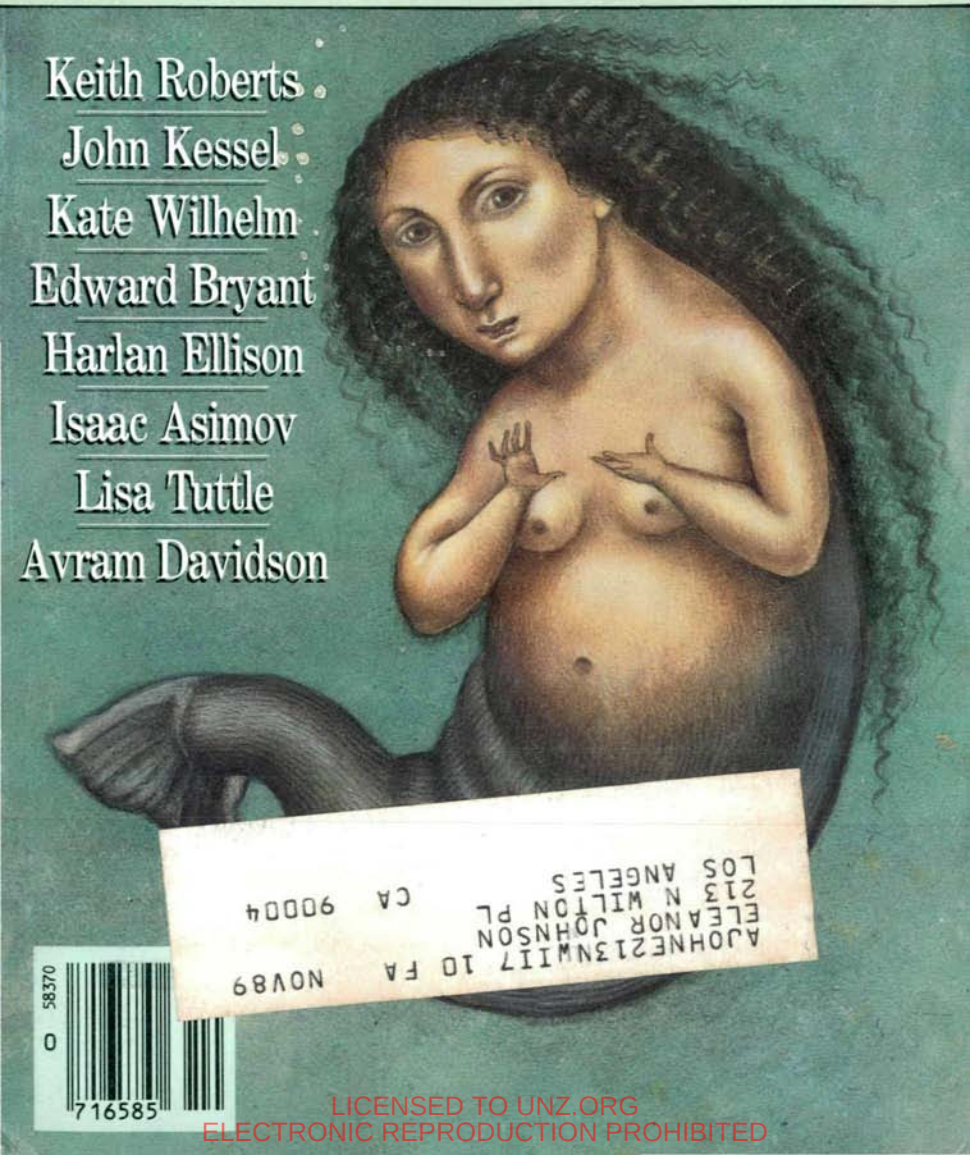

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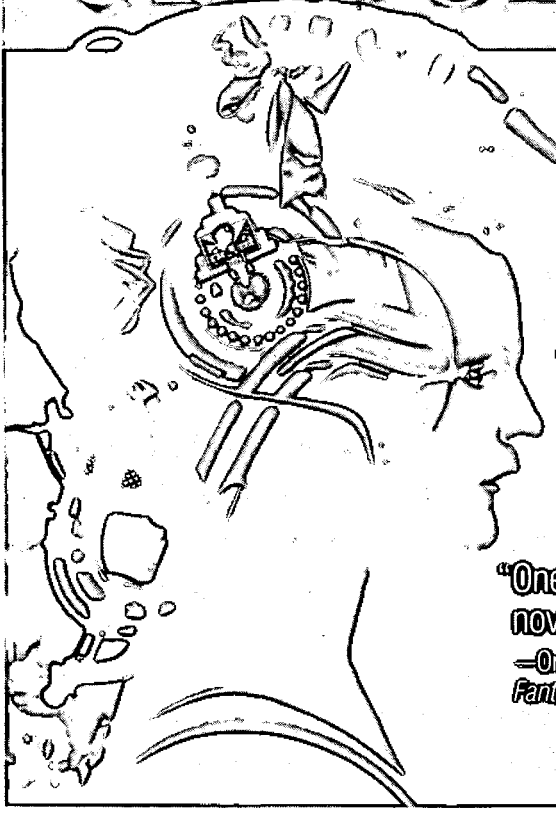

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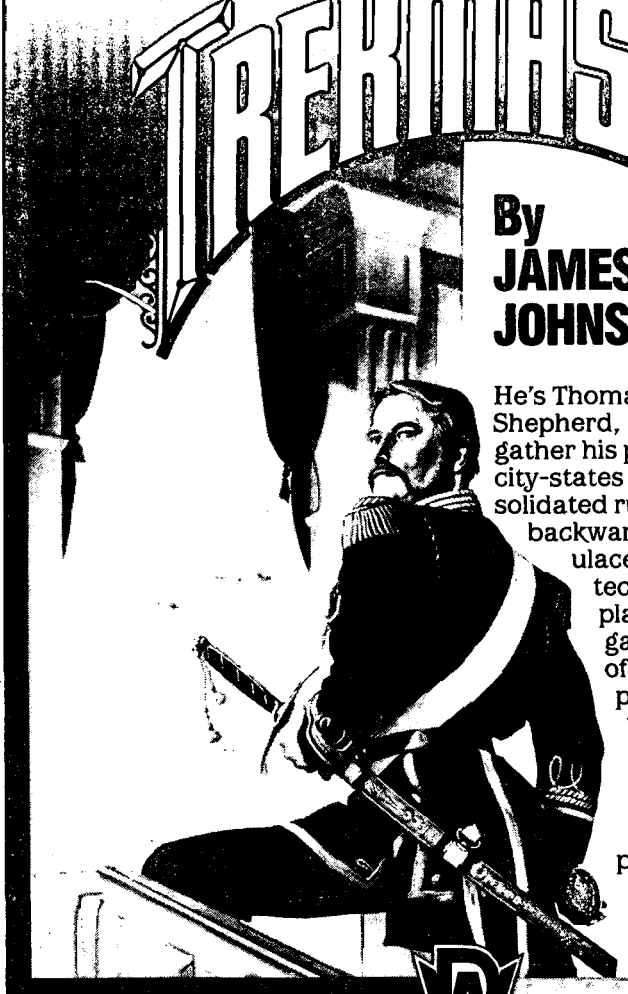

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OCTOBER • 38th Anniversary Issue

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In This Issue

Here we are at age 38, still vigorous but alert for signs of flab around the binding, the touch of gray in the logo. Time, we felt, for a new look, which begins in this anniversary issue. When we announced the upcoming redesign, one long-time contributor suggested that we go back to the original design, which was a distinguished one, by a distinguished designer, George Salter. We didn't do that, but long-time readers will notice some similarities, including the very readable one column format for the fiction.

We were after a design as compelling and elegant as the prose provided by our authors. This was accomplished in superior fashion by one of the country's leading designers, Hans Teensma. Mr. Teensma has worked on the design of such magazines as *Rolling Stone, Outside, Rocky Mountain Magazine* and *Savvy*. He is currently design director of *New England Monthly* (which has won the prestigious National Magazine Award for General Excellence for 1986 and 1987) and is a consultant for books and magazines through his studio, Impress.

We think you'll find the new look both inviting and readable, and, as always, we welcome your comments and suggestions.

Coming Soon

The November issue's feature story is Ursula K. LeGuin's novelet, "Buffalo Gals, Won't You Come Out Tonight," a gripping and unusual tale that is unlike anything you've ever read. Also on hand will be George Alec Effinger, with "Another Dead Grandfather" and James Patrick Kelly with an offbeat story that takes place at an SF convention. Its title is "Daemon."

Alice Sheldon, who has been writing science fiction for twenty years under the pseudonym James Tiptree, Jr., died in May 1987 under tragic circumstances. Two of her last stories will be coming up soon in F&SF: a wonderful SF adventure titled "The Color of Neanderthal Eyes," and a fantasy, "In the Midst of Life."

The November issue is on sale October 1, or use the coupon on page 26.

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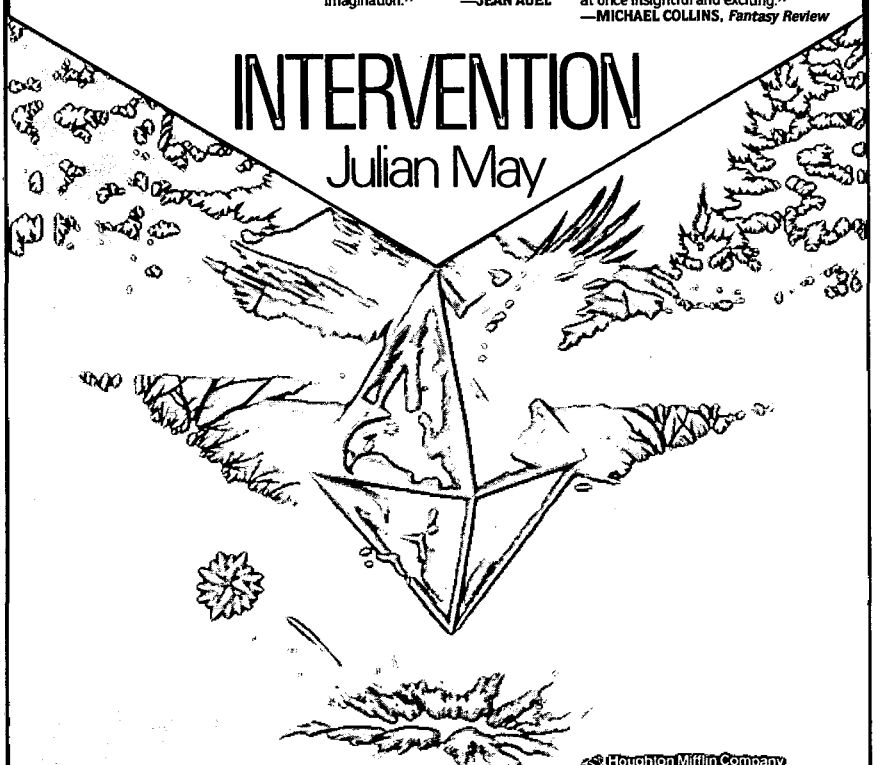
INTERVENTION

Julian May



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John Kessel's last story here was "Freedom Beach" (with James Patrick Kelly), which was later expanded into a novel published by TOR. Mr. Kessel is currently working on a novel titled CONFIDENCE. His new story is about a minor league baseball player, and while it may not be precisely a baseball story, it is concerned with things that make baseball fascinating: averages, statistics, luck . . .

JUDGMENT CALL

By John Kessel

BOTTOM OF THE FIRST, no score, Dutch on first, Simonetti on second, two outs. In the bar afterward, Sandy replayed it in his head.

Sandy had faced this Louisville pitcher maybe twice before. He had a decent fastball and a good curve, enough so he'd gotten Sandy out more than his share. And Sandy was in a slump (three for eighteen in the last five games), and the count was one and two; and the Louisville catcher was riding him. The ump was real quiet, but Sandy knew he was just waiting to throw his old rabbit punch to signal the big K — fist punching the air, but it might as well be Sandy's gut. It was hot. His legs felt rubbery.

Old War Memorial was quiet. There weren't more than fifteen hundred people there, tops; Louisville was leading the American Association, and the Bisons were dead last. The steel struts holding up the roof in right were ranked in the distance like the trees of the North Carolina pine forest where he grew up, lost in the haze and shadows of the top rows

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where nobody ever sat. The sky was overcast, and a heavy wind from the lake snapped the flag out in left center, but it was very hot for Buffalo, even for June. People were saying the climate was changing: it was the ozone layer, the Japs, the UFOs, the end of the world. Some off-duty cop or sanitation worker with a red face was ragging him from the stands. Sandy would have liked to deck him, but he had to ignore it because the pitcher was crouched over shaking off signals. He went into his stretch.

Then something happened: suddenly Sandy knew, he just knew he could hit this guy. The pitcher figured he had Sandy plugged — curveball, curveball, outside corner and low, then high and tight with the fastball to keep him from leaning — but it hit Sandy like a line drive between the eyes that he had the *pitcher* plugged, he *knew* where the next pitch was going to be. And there it was, fastball inside corner; and he turned on it; and *bye-bye, baby*! That sweet crack of the ash. Sandy watched it sail out over the left field fence; saw the pitcher, head down, kick dirt from the mound — sorry, guy; could be you won't see the majors as soon as you thought — and jogged around the bases feeling so *good*. He was going to live forever. He was going to get laid every night.

That was just his first at bat. In the bottom of the sixth, he made a shoestring catch in right center, and in the second and the seventh, he threw out runners trying to go from first to third. At the plate he went four for five, bringing his average up to a tantalizing .299. And number five was an infield bounce that Sandy was sure he'd beat out, but the wop ump at first called him out. A judgment call. The pud-knocker. But it was still the best game Sandy had ever played.

And Aronsen, the Sox general manager, was in town to take a look at the Bisons in the hope of finding somebody they could bring up to help them after the bad start they'd had. After the game he came by in the locker room. He glanced at Sandy's postgame blood panel. Sandy played it cool: he was at least 0.6 under the limit on DMD, not even on scale for steroids. Sandy should get ready right away, Aronsen told him, to catch the morning train to Chicago. They were sending Estivez down and bringing him up. They were going to give him a chance to fill the hole in right field. Yessir, Sandy said, polite, eager.

Lordy, lordy — yes sir, he'd thought as he walked down Best with Dutch and Leon toward the Main Street tramway — good-bye, War Memorial. The hulk of the stadium, the exact color of a Down East dirt

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farmer's tobacco-stained teeth, loomed above them, the Art Deco globes that topped its corners covered with pigeon shit. Atop the corroded limestone wall that ran along the street was a chain-link fence, rusted brown, and atop the fence glistened new coils of barbed wire. The barbed wire was supposed to keep vagrants from living in the stadium. It made the place look like a prison.

Now it was a few hours later, and Sandy was having a drink with Dutch and Leon at the Ground Zerp on Delaware. He'd already stopped by a machine and withdrawn the entire six hundred dollars in his account, had called up the rental office and told them he was leaving and they could rent the place because he wasn't coming back. Chalk up one for his side. Sandy paid for the first round. He had it figured: you paid for the first stiff one, you didn't hesitate a bit, and the others would remember that much better than how slow you were on the second or third: so if you played it right, you came out ahead on drinks when the evening was done. Even when you didn't, you got the rep with the regulars at the bar of being a generous kind of guy. Sure enough, Dutch had paid for the second round and Leon for the third, and then some fans came by and got the next two. So Sandy was way ahead. His day. Only one thing was needed to make it complete.

"You lucky sonofabitch," Dutch shouted over the din of the talk and the flatscreen behind the bar. "You haven't played that well in a month. The Killer decides to go crazy on the day that Aronsen's in town."

There was more than kidding in Dutch's voice. "That's when it pays to look your best," Sandy said.

Dutch stared at the screen, where a faggot VJ with a wig and ruffles and lace cuffs was counting down the Top 100 videos of the twentieth century. Most of them were from the past two years. "Wouldn't do me any good," Dutch said. "They've got two first basemen ahead of me. I could hit .350 and I wouldn't get a shot at the majors."

"Playin' the wrong position, man," said Leon. His high eyebrows gave him a perpetually innocent expression.

Dutch didn't have the glove to play anywhere else but first. Sandy felt a little sorry for Dutch, who had wrecked his chances with HGH. At eighteen he had been a pretty hot prospect, a first baseman who could hit for average and field O.K. But he didn't have any power, so he'd taken the hormone in order to beef up. He'd beefed up, all right — going to six five,

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230 — but his reflexes got shot to hell in the process. Now he could hit twenty home runs in triple-A ball, but he struck out too much and his fielding was mediocre and he was slow as an ox. And the American League had abandoned the DH rule just about the time Dutch went off the drug.

It was a sad story. But Sandy got tired of his bitching, too. A real friend didn't bitch at you when you got called up. "You ought to work on the glove," he said.

A glint of hate showed in Dutch's face for a second, then he said, "I got to piss," and headed for the men's room.

"Sometimes he gets to me," Sandy said.

Leon lazily watched the women in the room, leaning his back against the bar, elbows resting on the edge, his big, gnarled catcher's hands hanging loosely from his wrists. On the screen behind him, a naked girl was bouncing up and down on a pink neon pogo stick. Sandy couldn't tell if she was real or vidsynthed.

"Got to admit, Killer, you ain't been playin' that good lately," Leon said over his shoulder. They called Sandy "The Killer" because of the number of double plays he hit into: Killer as in rally killer. "You been clutched out. Been tryin' too hard."

Now it was Leon, too. Leon had grown up in Fayetteville, not ten miles from Sandy's dad's farm, but Sandy would not have hung around with Leon back there. Leon was ten years older, his father was a noncom at Fort Bragg, and he was the wrong color. Sandy always felt like blacks were keeping secrets that he would just as soon not know.

Sandy finished his bourbon and ordered another. "You don't win without trying."

Leon just nodded. "Look at that talent there." He pointed his chin toward a table in the corner.

At the table, alone, sat a woman. He wondered how she had got there without him noticing her: she had microshort blonde hair and a pale oval face with a pointed chin. Blue lips. Her dark eyelashes were long enough so that he could see them from the bar. But what got him was her body. Even from across the room, Sandy could tell she was major league material. She wore a tight blue dress and was drinking something pale, on the rocks.

She looked over at them and calmly locked glances with Sandy. Something strange happened then. He had a feeling of vertigo, and then was

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overwhelmed by a vivid memory, a flashback to something that had happened to him long before.

It's the end of the summer of your junior year of high school, and you're calling Jocelyn from the parking lot of the Dairy King out near Highway 95. Brutal heat. Tapping your car keys impatiently on the dented metal shelf below the phone. Jocelyn is going to Atlantic Beach with Sid Phillips, and she hasn't even told you. Five rings, six. You had to get the news from Trudy Jackson and act like you knew all about it when it was like you'd been kneed in the groin.

An answer. "Hello?"

"Miz James, this is Sandy Ellison. Can I talk to Jocelyn?"

"Just a minute." Another wait. The sun burns the back of your neck.

"Hello." Jocelyn's voice sounds nervous.

The anger explodes in your chest. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

A semi blasts by on Highway 95, kicking up a cloud of dust and gravel. You turn your back to the road and hold your hand over your other ear.

"What are you talking about?"

"You better not fuck with me, Jocelyn. I won't take it."

"Slow down, Sandy. I—"

"If you go to the beach with him, it's over." You try to make it sound like a threat instead of a plea.

At first, Jocelyn doesn't answer. Then she says, "You always were a jerk." She hangs up.

You stand there with the receiver in your hand. It feels hot and greasy. The dial tone mocks you. Then Jeff Baxter and Jack Stubbs drive in Jeff's Trans-Am, and the three of you cruise out to the lake and drink three six-packs."Bitch," you call her. "Fucking bitch."

The woman was still staring at him. She didn't look at all like Jocelyn. Sandy broke eye contact. He realized that Dutch had come back, had been back for a while while Sandy was spaced-out. Fucking Jocelyn.

Sandy made a decision. "One hundred says I boost her tonight."

Leon regarded him coolly. Dutch snorted. "Gonna pull down your batting average, boy."

"Definitely a tough chance," Leon said.

"You think so? It's my day. We'll see who's trying too hard, Leon."

"You got a bet."

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Sandy pulled the wad of bills out his shirt pocket and laid two fifties on the bar. "You hold it, Dutch. I'll get it back tomorrow when I pick up my gear." Dutch stuffed the redbucks into his shirt pocket. Sandy picked up his drink and went over to the table. The woman watched him the whole way. Up close she was even more spectacular. "Hey," he said.

"Hello. It's about time. I've been waiting for you."

He pulled out a chair and sat down. "Sure you have."

"I never lie." Her smile was a dare. "How much is riding on this?"

He couldn't tell whether she was hostile or just a tease. Well, he could go with the pitch. "One hundred," Sandy said. "That's a week's pay in triple-A."

"What is triple-A?" Her husky voice had some trace of accent to it — Hispanic?

"Baseball. My name is Sandy Ellison. I play for the Bisons."

She sipped her drink. Her ears were small and flat against her head. The shortness of her hair made her head seem large and her violet eyes enormous. He would die if he didn't have her that night. "Are you a good player?" she asked.

"I just got called up to the majors. Monday night I'll be starting for Chicago."

"You are a lucky man."

Luck again. The way she said it made Sandy think for a moment he was being set up: Leon and Dutch and all that talk about luck. But Dutch was too dumb to pull some elaborate practical joke. Leon was smart enough, but he wasn't mean enough. Still, it would be a good idea to stay on his guard. "Not luck; skill."

"Oh, skill. I thought you were lucky."

"How come I've never seen you here before?"

"I'm from out of town."

"I figured as much. Where?"

"Lexington."

Sandy ran his finger around the rim of his glass. "Kentucky? We just played Louisville. You follow the Cards on their road trips?"

"Road trips?"

"The game we played today was against the Louisville Cardinals. They're in town on a road trip."

"What a coincidence." Again the smile. "I'm on a road trip, too. But I'm

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not following this baseball team. I came to Buffalo for another reason, and I'm leaving tomorrow."

"It's a good town to be leaving. You help me celebrate, and I'll help you."

"That's why I'm here."

Right. Sandy glanced over at the bar. Leon and Dutch were talking to a couple of women. On the flatscreen was a newsflash about the microwave deluge in Arizona. Shots of househubs at the supermarket wearing their aluminized suits. He turned back to the woman and smiled. "Run that by me again."

The woman gazed at him calmly over her high cheekbones. "Come on, Sandy. Read my lips. This is your lucky day, and I'm here to celebrate it with you. A skillful man like you must understand what that means."

"Did Leon put you up to this? If he did, the bet's off."

"Leon is one of those two men at the bar? I don't know him. If I were to guess, I would guess that he is the black man. I'd also guess that you proposed the bet to him, not he to you. Am I right?"

"I made the bet."

"You see. My lucky guess. Well, if you made the bet with Leon, then it's unlikely that Leon hired me to trick you. It is unlikely for other reasons, too."

This was the weirdest pickup talk Sandy had ever heard. "Why do I get the feeling there's a proposition coming?"

"Don't tell me you didn't expect a proposition to pass between us sometime during this conversation."

"For sure. But I expected to be making it."

"Go ahead."

Sandy studied her. "You northern girls are different."

"I'm not from the North."

"Then you're from a different part of the South than I grew up in."

"It takes all kinds. May I ask you a question?"

"Sure."

"Why the bet?"

"I just wanted to make it interesting."

"I'm not interesting enough unless there's money riding on me?"

Riding on her. Sandy smiled. The woman smiled back. "I just like to raise the stakes," he said. "But the bet is between me and them, to prove a point. It has nothing to do with you."

"You're not very flattering."

"That's not what I meant."

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"Yes. We can make it even more interesting. You think you can please me?"

Sandy finished his bourbon. "If you can be pleased."

"Good. So let's make it very interesting." She opened her clutch purse and tilted it toward him. She reached inside and held something so that Sandy could see it. A glint of metal. It was a straight razor.

"If you don't please me, I get to hurt you. Just a little."

Sandy stared at her. "Are you kidding?"

She stared back. Her look was steady.

"Maybe you're not as good as you tell me. Maybe you'll need to have some luck."

She had to be teasing. Sandy considered the odds. Even if she wasn't, he thought he could handle her. Sandy stood up. "It's a deal."

She didn't move. "You're sure you want to try this?"

"I know what I want when I see it."

"You already know enough to make a decision?"

He came around to her side of the table. "Let's go," he said. She closed her purse and led him toward the door. Sandy winked at Leon as they passed the bar; Leon's face looked as surprised and skeptical as ever. The girl's hips, swaying as she walked ahead of him, pulled him along the way the smell of food in the dumpster by the concession stand drew the retirees living in the cardboard boxes on Jefferson Avenue.

Once in the street he slipped an arm around her waist and nudged her over to the side of the building. Her perfume was dizzying. "What's your name?" he asked her.

"Judith," she said.

"Judith." It sounded so old-fashioned. There was a Judith in the Bible, he thought. But he never paid attention in Bible Class.

He kissed her. He had to force his tongue between her lips. Then she bit it, lightly. Her mouth was strong and wet. She moved her hips against him.

You are twelve. You're sitting in the Beulah Land Baptist Church with your mother. She must be thirty-five or so, a pretty woman with blonde hair, putting on a little weight. Your father doesn't go to church. Lately your mother has been going more often and reading from the Bible after supper.

Some of your classmates, including Carrie Ford and Sue Harvey, are being baptized that Sunday. The two girls ride the bus with you, and Carrie has the biggest tits in the seventh grade.

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The choir sings a hymn while the Reverend Mr. Foster takes the girls into the side room; and when the song is done, the curtains in front of the baptismal font open and there stand the minister and Carrie, waist-deep in the water. Carrie is wearing a blue robe, trying nervously not to smile. Behind them is a painting of the lush green valley of the Promised Land, and the shining City on the Hill. The strong light from the spot above them makes Carrie's golden hair shine, too.

The Reverend Mr. Foster puts his hand on Carrie's shoulder, lifts his other hand toward heaven, and calls on the Lord.

"Do you renounce Satan and all his ways?" he asks Carrie.

"Yes," she says, looking holy. She crosses her hands at the wrists, palms in, and folds her hands over those tits, as if to hold them in.

The Minister touches the back of her neck. She jumps a bit, and you know she didn't expect that, but then lets him duck her head beneath the surface of the water. He holds her down for a long time, making sure she knows who's boss. You like that. The Minister says the words of the baptism and pulls her up again.

Carrie gasps and sputters. She lifts her hands to push the hair away from her eyes. The robe clings to her chest. You can see everything. As she tries to catch her breath, you feel yourself getting an erection.

You put your hand on your lap and try to make the erection go away, but the mere contact with your pants leg makes you get even harder. You can't help it; your dick has run away with you. You turn red and shift uncomfortably in the pew, and your mother looks at you. She sees your hand on your lap.

"Sandy!" she hisses. A woman in front of you looks around.

Your mother tries to ignore you. The curtains close. You wish you were dead. At the same time you want to get up, go to the side room, and watch Carrie Ford take off her wet robe and towel herself dry.

He felt the warmth of Judith's lips on his, her arms around his neck. He pushed away from her, staring. This was no time for some drug flashback. After a moment he placed his hands on either side of her head against the wall and leaned toward her. She bit her lower lip. He had an erection after all. Whether it was because of the memory or Judith, he couldn't tell; he couldn't tell; he felt the embarrassment and guilt that had burned in him at the church. He felt mad. "Listen," he said. "Let's go to my place."

"Whatever you like." They walked down the block to the tram station.

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Sandy lived in one of the luxury condos that had been built on the Erie Basin before the market crash. He had an expensive view across the lake. It was even more high-rent now that the Sunbelters were moving North to escape the drought.

They got off downtown and walked up River Street to the apartment; he inserted his ID card and punched in the security code. The lock snapped open, and Sandy ushered her in.

The place was wasted on Judith. She walked through his living room, the moon through the skylight throwing triangular shadows against the cathedral ceiling and walls, and thumbed on the bedroom light as if she had been there before. When he followed her, he found her standing just inside the door. She began to unbutton his shirt. He felt hot. He tried to undress her, but she pushed his hands away, pushed him backward until he fell awkwardly onto the water bed. She stood above him. The expression on her face was very grave.

She knelt on the undulating bed and rested her hands on his chest. He fumbled on the headboard shelf for the amyl nitrite. She pushed his hand away, took one of the caps, and broke it under his nose. His heart slammed against his ribs as if it would leap out of his chest; the air he breathed was hot and dry, and the tightness of the crotch of his jeans was agony. Eventually she helped him with that, but not before she had spent what seemed like an eternity making it worse.

The sight of her naked almost made him come right then. But she knew how to control that. She seemed to know everything in his mind before he knew it himself; she responded or didn't respond as he needed, precisely, kindly. She became everything that he wanted. She took him to the brink again and again, stopped just short, brought him back. She seemed hooked into the sources of his desire: his pain, his fear, his hope all translated into the simple, slow motions of her sex and his. He forgot to worry about whether he was pleasing her. He forgot who he was. For an hour he forgot everything.

It was dark. Sandy lay just on the edge of sleep with his eyelids sliding closed and the distant sound of a siren in the air. The siren faded.

"You're beautiful, Sandy," Judith said. "I may not cut you after all."

Sandy felt so groggy he could hardly think. "Nobody cuts The Killer," he mumbled, and laughed. He rolled onto his stomach. The bed undulated; he felt dizzy.

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"You're beautiful, Sandy," Judith said. "I may not cut you after all."

"Such a wonderful body. Such a hard dick."

She slid her hand down his backbone, and as she did, all the muscles of his back relaxed, as if it were a twisted cord that she was unwinding. It was almost a dream. In the back part of his mind was a tiny alarm, like the siren that had passed into another part of the city.

"Now," said Judith, "I want to tell you a story."

"Sure."

Lightly stroking his back, Judith said, "This is the story of Yancey Camera."

"Funny name." He felt so sleepy.

"It is. To begin with, Yancey Camera was a young man of great promise and trustful good nature. Would you believe me if I told you that he was as handsome as the leading man in a black-and-white movie? He was that handsome, and was as smart as he was handsome, and was as rich as he was smart. His dick was as reliable as his credit rating. He was a lucky young man.

"But Yancey did not believe in luck. Oh, he gave lip service to luck; when people said, 'Yancey, you're a lucky boy,' he said, 'Yes, I guess I am.' But when he thought about it, he understood that when they told him how lucky he was, they were really saying that he did not deserve his good fortune; had done nothing to earn it; and, in a more rationally ordered universe, he would not be handsome, smart, or rich, and his dick would be no more reliable than any other man's. Yancey came to realize that when people commented on his luck, they were really expressing their envy, and he immediately suspected those people. This lack of trust enabled him to spot more than a few phonies, for there was a large degree of truth in Yancey Camera's analysis.

"The problem was that as time went on and Yancey saw how much venality was concealed by people's talk of luck, he forgot that he had not initially done anything to earn the good looks, intellect, wealth, and hard dick that he possessed. In other words, Sandy, he came to disbelieve in luck. He thought that a man of his skills could control every situation. He forgot about the second law of thermodynamics, which tells us that we all lose,

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and that those times when we win are merely local statistical deviations in a universal progress from a state of lower to a state of higher entropy. Yancey's own luck was just such a local deviation. As time passed and Yancey's good fortune continued, he began ultimately to think that he was beyond the reach of the second law of thermodynamics."

Forget the alarm; forget the razor. The second law of sexual dynamics. First you screw her, then she talks. Sandy thought about the instant he had hit the home run, the feel of the bat in his hands, the contact with the ball so pure and sweet he knew it was out of the park even before he had finished following through.

"This is a sin that the Fates call hubris," Judith said, "and as soon as they realized the extent of Yancey Camera's error, they set about to rectify the situation. Now, there are several ways in which such an imbalance can be restored. It can be done in stages, or it can be done in one sudden, enormous stroke.

"And here my story divides: in one version of the story, Yancey Camera marries a beautiful young woman, fathers four sons, and opens an automobile dealership. Unfortunately, because Yancey's home is built on the site of a chemical waste dump, one of his boys is born with spina bifida and is confined to a wheelchair. The child dies at the age of twelve. One of his other boys is unable to compete in school and becomes a behavior problem. A third is brilliant but commits suicide at the age of fourteen when his girlfriend goes to the beach with another boy. Under the pressure of these disappointments, Yancey's wife becomes a shrill harridan. She gets fat and drinks and embarrasses him at parties. Yancey gets fat, too, and loses his hair. He is left with the consolation of his auto dealership, but then there is a war in the Middle East in which the oil fields are destroyed with atomic weapons. Suddenly there is no more oil. Yancey goes bankrupt. A number of other things happen that I will not tell you about. Suffice it to say that by the end of this version of the story, Yancey has lost his good looks, his money, and finally his fine mind, which becomes unhinged by the pressures of his misfortune. In the end he loses his hard dick, too, and dies cursing his bad luck. For in the end he is certain that bad luck, and not his own behavior, is responsible for his destruction. And he is right."

"That's too bad."

"That is too bad, isn't it?" Judith lifted the hair from the back of his neck

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with the tips of her fingers. It tickled.

"The other version of the story, Sandy, is even more interesting. Yancey Camera grows older, and success follows success in his life. He marries a beautiful young woman who does not get fat, and fathers four completely healthy and well-adjusted sons. He becomes a successful lawyer and enters politics. He wins every election he enters. Eventually he becomes the President of the Entire Country. As president he visits every state capital. Everywhere he goes the people of the nation gather to meet him, and when Yancey departs, he leaves two groups of citizens behind. The first group goes home saying, 'What a fortunate people we are to have such a handsome, smart, and wealthy president.' Others say, 'What a smart, handsome, and wealthy people we are to have elected such a handsome, smart, and wealthy leader.' What a skilled nation, they tell themselves, they must be. Like their president, they assume that their gifts are not the result of good luck but of their inherent virtue. Therefore, all who point out this good luck must be jealous. And so the Fates or the second law of thermodynamics deal with Yancey's nation as they dealt with Yancey in the other version of this story. In their arrogance, Yancey Camera and his people, in the effort to maintain an oil supply for their automobiles, provoke a war that destroys all life on earth, including the lives, good looks, wealth, and hard dicks of all the citizens of that country, lucky and unlucky. The end.

"What do you think of that, Sandy?"

Sandy was on the verge of sleep. "I think you're hung up on dicks," he mumbled, smiling to himself. "All you women."

"Could be," Judith whispered. Her breath was warm on his ear. He fell asleep.

He woke with a start. She was no longer lying beside him. How could he have let down his guard so easily? She could have ripped him off — or worse. Where had he put the cash from the bank? He rolled over and reached for his pants on the floor beside the bed, then poked his index finger into the hip pocket. It was empty. He felt an adrenal surge, lurched out of bed, and began to haul on his pants. He was hopping toward the hallway, tugging on his zipper, when he saw her through the open bathroom door.

She turned toward him. The light behind her was on. Her face was totally in shadow, and her voice, when she spoke, was even huskier than the voice he had heard before.

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"Did you find it?" she asked.

He felt afraid. "Find what?"

"Your money."

Then he remembered he had stuck the crisp bills, fresh from the machine, into the button-flap pocket of his shirt. He ran back to the bed, found the shirt on the floor, and fumbled at it. The money was there.

When he turned back to her, she was standing over him. She reached down and touched his face.

You're fifteen. You are sitting at the chipped Formica table in the kitchen of the run-down farmhouse, sweating in the ninety-degree heat, eating a peanut butter sandwich and drinking a glass of sweet tea. The air is damp and hot as a fever compress. Through the patched screen door, you can see the porch; the dusty, red-clay yard; and a corner of the tobacco field, vivid green, running down toward the even darker line of trees along the bend of the Cape Fear that marks the edge of the farm. The air is full of the sweet smell of the tobacco. Even the sandwich tastes of it.

You're wearing your high school baseball uniform. Your spikes and glove — a Dale Murphy autograph — rest on the broken yellow vinyl of the only other serviceable kitchen chair. You're starting in right today, at two o'clock, in the first round of the Cumberland County championships, and afterward you're going out for pizza with Jocelyn. Your heart is pulling you away from the farm; your thoughts fly through a jumble of images; Jocelyn's fine blonde hair, the green of the infield grass, the brightly painted ads on the outfield fence, the way the chalk lines glow blinding white in the summer sun, the smell of Jocelyn's shoulders when you bury your face in the nape of her neck. If you never have to suffer through another summer swamped under the sickly sweet smell of tobacco, it will be all right with you.

You finish eating and are washing out the glass and plate in the sink, when you hear your father's boots on the porch and the screen door slams behind him. You ignore the old man. He comes over to the counter, opens the cupboard, and takes out the bottle of sour mash bourbon and a drinking glass. Less than an inch is left in the bottom of the bottle. He curses and pours the bourbon into the glass, then drinks it off without putting down the bottle. He sighs heavily and leans against the counter.

You dry your hands quickly and get your glove and spikes.

"Where you going?" your father asks, as if the uniform and equipment are not enough.

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"We got a game today."

He looks at you. His eyes are set in a network of wrinkles that come from squinting against the sun. Mr. Witt, the high school coach, has the same wrinkles around his eyes, but his are from playing outfield when he was with Atlanta. And Mr. Witt's eyes are not red.

Your father doesn't say anything. He takes off his billed cap and wipes his forearm across his brow. He turns and reaches into the sugar canister he keeps in the cupboard next to his bottles. You try to leave, but are stopped by his voice again. "Where's the sugar bowl money?"

"I don't know."

His voice is heavy, slow. "There was another twelve dollars in here. What did you do with it?"

You stand in the door, helpless. "I didn't touch your money."

"Liar. What did you do with it!"

Pure hatred flares in you. "I didn't take your fucking money, you old drunk!"

You slam out the screen door and stalk over to the beat-up Maverick that you worked nights and weekends saving up to buy. You grind the gearshift into first, let the engine roar through the rotten muffler, spin the tires on the dirt in the yard. In the side mirror you see the old man standing on the porch shouting at you. But you can't hear what he's shouting, and the image shakes crazily as you bounce up the rutted drive.

Sandy flinched. He was crouched in his apartment, and the woman was standing over him. He still shook with anger at his father's accusation, still sweated from the heat; he could still smell the tobacco baking in the sun. How he hated the old man and his suspicion. For the first time in years, he felt the vivid contempt he'd had then for the smallness that made his father that way.

He backed away from Judith, shaking. She reached out and touched him again.

You're in this same bedroom, leaning half out of a bed where you've just gotten your ashes hauled better than you have in your entire life, in order to stick your finger into a pocket to see whether you've been robbed. On the day that you made the majors, on the day that you played better than you have in your entire life, on the day you played better than, in truth, you know you are really able to play. Sticking your finger into your pants pocket like a half-wit sticking his finger up his ass because it feels

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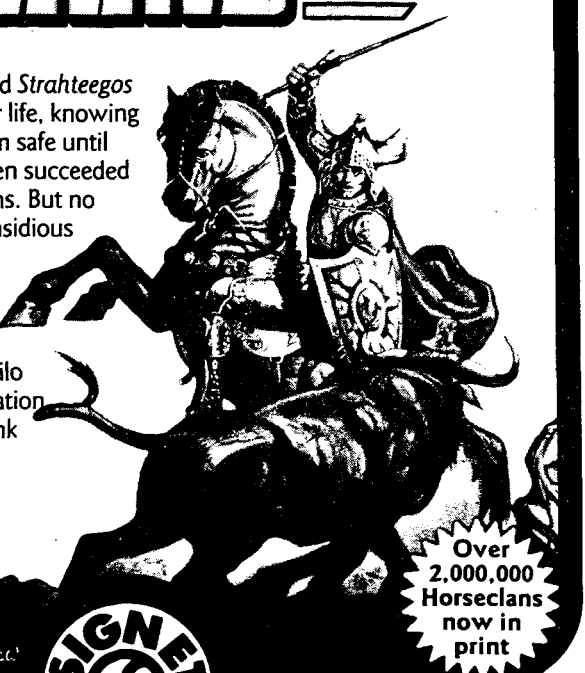

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so good. A pitiful loser. Just like your father.

Sandy jerked away from her. He scrambled toward the bed, suddenly terrified. His knees were so weak he couldn't pull himself into the bed.

"What's the matter, Sandy?" She stepped toward him.

"Don't touch me!"

"You don't like my touch?"

"You're going to kill me." He said it quietly, amazed; and as he spoke, he realized it was true.

She moved closer. "That remains to be seen, Sandy."

"Don't touch me again! Please!"

"Why not?"

Cowering, he looked up at her, trying to make out her face in the darkness. It wasn't fair. But then something welled up in him, and he knew it *was* fair, and that was almost more than he could stand. "I'm sorry," he said.

She knelt beside him, wrapped her arms around him, and said nothing.

After a while he stopped crying. He wiped his eyes and nose with the corner of the bed sheet, ashamed. He sat on the edge of the bed, back to her. "I'm sorry," he said.

"Yes," she said. Then he saw that in her other hand, the one she had not touched him with, she held the straight razor. She had been holding it all the time.

"I didn't realize I might be hurting your feelings," he said.

"You can't hurt my feelings." There was no emotion in her voice. There was nothing. Looking at her face was like looking at an empty room.

"Don't worry," she said, folding the blade back into the handle. "I won't hurt you."

It was a blind voice. Sandy shuddered. She leaned toward him. Her body was excruciatingly beautiful, yet he stumbled back from the bed, grabbing for his shirt, as if the pants weren't enough, as if it were January and he was lost on the lakefront in a blizzard.

"You don't have to be afraid," she said. "Come to bed."

He stood there, indecisive. He had to get out of there. She was insane — fuck insane; she wasn't even human. He looked into her cold face. It was not dead. It was like the real woman was in another place and this body was a receiver over which she was bringing him a message from a far distance — from another country, from across the galaxy. If he left now, he

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would be okay, he knew. But something that might have happened to him would not happen, and in order to find out what that was, he would have to take a big chance. He looked up at the moon through the skylight. The clouds passed steadily across it, making it look like it was moving. The moon didn't move that fast; it moved so slowly that you couldn't tell, except Sandy knew that in five minutes the angle of the shadows on the wall and chair and bed would be all different. The room would be changed.

She was still in bed. Sandy came back, dropped the shirt, took off his pants, and got in beside her. Her skin was very smooth.

The clock read 8:45; he would have to hurry. He felt good. He got his bags out of the closet and began to pack. Halfway through, he stopped to get the shirt he had left on the floor. He picked it up and shoved it into his laundry bag, then remembered the cash and pulled it out again. She had left him fifteen dollars. One ten, five ones.

He pushed the shirt down into the bottom of the bag and finished packing. He called a cab and rode over to War Memorial.

On the Hitachi in the cab, he watched the morning news, hoping to get the baseball scores. Nothing. The Reverend Mr. Gilray declares the

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Abomination of Desolation has begun, the Judgment is at hand. Reports the Israelis have used tactical nukes in the Djibouti civil war. Three teenagers spot another UFO at Chestnut Ridge.

When he got to the park, Sandy tipped the cabbie a redbuck and went directly to the locker room and cleaned out his locker. He was hoping to avoid Leon or Dutch, but just as he was getting ready to leave, Dutch showed up to take some hitting before the Sunday afternoon game.

"Looks like I underrated you, sport. Just like on the field." He hauled out his wallet and began to get the bills.

"Keep it," Sandy said.

"Huh?" Dutch, surprised, looked like a vanilla imitation of Leon's perpetual innocence.

"Leon won the bet."

Dutch snickered. "She got wise to you, huh?"

Sandy zipped his bag shut and picked up his glove and bats. He smiled. "You could say that. I got to go — cab's waiting. Wish me luck."

"Thought you didn't need luck."

"Goes to show you what I know. Say good-bye to Leon for me, O.K.?" He shook Dutch's hand and left.

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BOOKS

ALGIS BUDRYS

Misery, Stephen King, Viking, $19.95

Science Fiction and Fantasy Reference Index, 1878-1985, H.W. Hall, Ed., Gale Research Co., Two vols., $175.00

STEPHEN KING, it seems to me, is the contemporary writer we *must* understand. Define "we": everybody who reads, including the most conscious keepers of the veriest, immortalest flame of the literary art. King is at first glance a law unto himself — author of some finely crafted literary short stories (for all that they appear in commercial markets) and some short chunks of pulp clearly intended for the back of *Weird Tales*; of knock-kneed, contorted collaborative cameleopards like *The Talisman*, sheer fabrications like *Cujo*, pastiches like "The Breathing Method" and yet, right beside it in *Different Seasons*, "The Body," one of the key pieces of late twentieth century American writing; excellent hugger-mugger like *Firestarter*, and the curiously plaintive, grippingly effective *It*, which fails only if you insist that it is a novel about horrid events as distinguished from horror.

King is massively, one might say monstrously, creative. Neither verticalized genre distinctions nor horizontal levels of quality hold him; he has undermined all notions that quality is "intrinsic" to a writer, and he has reduced generic classifications to the nothing that they are.

The massive, twisted, recent *It*, in fact, turns out to lead up to his latest, *Misery*, at first glance a much more manageable article of commerce. But only at first glance. For example, although it gives off every sense of being part of a continuing exploration* of Stephen King by

**A deliberate exploration which, hindsight reveals, began with his nonfiction work,* Danse Macabre. *That was taken to be an informal study of horror films, but is actually about Stevie King going to the movies. King is not of the first generation to react to media, but he is of the generation that broke partway out in hopes that media might somehow replace reality rather than merely shade its earlier forms.*

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Stephen King, *Misery* contains no element of the fantastic — it is "straight" horror, readily classifiable as one of what King, more than anyone, is making into a separate literature. But now, define "separate literature."

Used to be easy. Thanks to King, no. One can point to Lovecraft, to Kafka before him, to Thomas Tryon and William Peter Blatty, but where one is pointing from is on territory defined by the sweep of King's shadow. And that shadow rotates across portions of fantasy and science fiction, of the coming-of-age story, the murder story, the detective story as different from it, and the "regional" novel, to pick out just the obvious once separate forms they used to discuss — or fastidiously not discuss — when I was sitting patiently through literature courses at various universities, some ivied and some infested by palmetto bugs, all promising that but did you subscribe, all, including the secret handshakes, would be revealed.

Others have gone "cross-genre"; it is nearly mandatory in a young commercial writer's life, for instance, that he or she dabble a bit, as Evan Hunter, Donald Westlake, John D. Macdonald and Erle Stanley Gardner did in SF. But that's not what we're talking about. A Theodore Sturgeon western is clearly a Theodore Sturgeon story nonetheless; Fredric Brown wrote the same as a mystery writer of an SF writer, and Lester del Rey once wrote just about the only pulp sports story that treated roller derby with respect, but none of that is relevant and please don't bring it up again.

What we have in King's case is a massively popular writer who, unlike Leon Uris or Ernest Hemingway or Jorge Luis Borges is not required to deliver the product as before. King is not selling a particular milieu, a particular kind of plot, a particular style, or a particular creed. Ipso facto, he is not like any other massively popular writer there has ever been, except for those who have followed him, and who quite likely would not have written as they write except for his example.

King is a law unto himself. Define that:

Well, the thing is, if a person were truly a law unto himself, he'd be incomprehensible to those of us who live under some different regime. Yet clearly our ostensible laws do not confine King. Ergo, our ostensible laws are only ostensible; there is something under the surface, so pervasive, so powerful, that King is rocketed to prominence by having seen it. But it is we who rocket him; or law moves us, *but we do not know that law.* What talking we do about the law is powerless, and a masque for the face we dare but peek at.

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Would I jive you?

And so to *Misery*, from which it is clear that King is very well aware that an author's work, though ostensibly fictitious, can tap into a reader's psychic reality to an impressive extent. Certainly Annie Wilkes, retired reclusive homicidal nurse, is not clear in her mind on the question of whether reality derives from media. When Paul Sheldon, best-selling author of bodice-ripper historical romances starring the saucy Misery Chastain as their heroine victim, wrecks his car and most of his body on a Colorado mountain road, Annie retrieves him and keeps him. She is his "Number One Fan," thunderstruck with delight at having chanced across Misery's creator, moved by somewhat darker impulses to seclude him in her home, give him only what crude medical attention she can muster, and addict him to painkillers.

Now, Paul has his ambitions, including a positive loathing for the Misery books and an ambition to force the world's appreciation of his better, "real" novels, which sell only sparsely. His crash in fact results from a celebratory drunk following completion of his latest "serious" effort, and the knowledge that the latest Misery paperback contains the scenes in which she is irrevocably, irretrievably killed.

Annie Wilkes soon begins modifying his views. Reading his serious manuscript, she is shocked by its gutter realism, and makes Paul ceremonially burn the only copy. Then, when she discovers that he has killed Misery, she takes sterner measures to redress reality. Annie gets Paul an old typewriter, rigs up his wheelchair so he can type, and sets him to writing the next Misery novel, in which she is found to have not died, and can go on to have another suitably titillating sadomasochistic adventure.

This evolution takes quite a few pages, interspersed with scenes in which Paul is degraded and humiliated by the monstrously solicitous Annie, and in which he discovers she has been killing people for years, etc. Highlights include the spearing of a nosy state trooper with a cross intended for Annie's pig's grave — and the running-over of the still spasming trooper with a power lawnmower — the chopping off of Paul's foot, and the removal of his left thumb with an electric carving knife. Some of this is part of a disciplinary program; some of it is editorial intervention in the new manuscript, which at first is not "real" enough for Annie.

I commend your particular attention to the passages in which Annie spurns Paul's first attempt to

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revive Misery. Annie's words represent a closely reasoned critique of the "With a superhuman effort he burst his bonds" school of writing. It's not real, it's a cheat, she fumes, though the scene of Misery's return brought tears of maudlin joy to her eyes. How can it be a cheat? Paul rejoins, I wrote it and I create Misery's world. No, says Annie, Misery's world is of course a fiction romance in which the object is to keep Misery alive and active forever, but (in effect) in the previous book Paul had done such a meticulous job of describing her bonds that no breaking of them is believable. Does he take her for a fool, not to know how strong those bonds were? No, he must get out of the bonds by some *believable* bald-facedly arranged set of circumstances . . . that is, he must not insult her intelligence, which is to say her devoted familiarity with the previous bald-faced arrangement.

And, by God, she's right, Paul realizes.* There are subtle rules within crude constructs . . . and, he gradually realizes, to his growing horror, he actually *does* prefer the bodice-ripper world of Misery to the "realism" of his high-flown ambitions, which have come to seem egocentric, pretentious and shallow when compared to the emotional loading possible in the Misery world.

There is more — much more — detail here, and crying out to be fruitful to scholars it is, too. I can only hope that some of them take this up, for the resulting monograph would easily run much longer than the novel's approximately 300 pages.

Now, my problem with it is that to make consistent sense it ought to have ended the way Annie wanted: With the completion of *Misery's Return*, her reading of it, her killing of Paul at that point, and then a glorious immolation in which Annie, isolated farmhouse, surviving pet pig, manuscript and all went up in a conclusive outburst of raw emotion, with the tortured, mutilated, transfigured Paul ecstatically concurring.

Instead, he gets out of it, Annie dies, *Misery's Return* is a smash success, and toward the end, prosthetic foot and all, he gets an idea for another (pretentious?) "real"

He realizes it about the same way this reader did. As dramatized in King's novel, the scene works and Annie's rationale is clear enough for Paul to respond to it and act on it. But in the objective world, King has yet to fully express this case in language clear to someone a generation older than he. But in there, scholars, is the explanation for why deus ex machina *was fully satisfactory as a storytelling device for many more centuries than it has not been. It may take King one more book. Or me one more review.*

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novel, as distinguished from something further in the Misery universe. Is he finking out on what was so hard won? Has he decided he was kidding himself? Has he decided he is a captive to his Muse? Can't tell — deponent saith not.

This may be an ending imposed by Viking, with its eye on a million-copy first printing and a Main Selection of the Book of The Month Club. There is even a passage, toward the end of Paul's capitivity, in which Paul says a few words about weak endings and doing, after all, only as much as you can. That may have some application to the ending of the Stephen King book as well as *Misery's Return.*

As it stands, we have some interesting questions. Is Annie Wilkes — horrid, murderous, mad Annie Wilkes — the reading public, or is she the Muse . . . or are the two truly distinguishable? There is evidence to indicate that Annie is still with Paul, even after death. If she is inspiring his new "realistic" novel, has horrible death improved her taste in literature? Or has it perverted it into an echo of what drove Paul to crash in a blizzard in the first place?

But, you know what? I'm not even going to attempt to worry these bones any further. King is yet alive and well . . . and presumably preparing his next book. As I lie here chained, delirious and crushed, I can hear him stirring around in the next room, muttering to himself. What is he honing?

Well, someday, the above words may be cited in some tome useful to scholars. (Drop it on your toe, and it would be damned useful to orthopedic specialists.) *Science Fiction and Fantasy Reference Index 1878-1985* is, in fact, two volumes, either one of which could flat your tarsals, adding up to 1,460 pages. Edited by the unflagging H. W. Hall, it claims more than 43,000 "access points" into prose SF produced during those more than 100 years.

"Access points" means author and subject indexes of historical and critical articles, books and essays *on* SF, as distinguished from the literature, plus sociological studies and other secondary materials. Sources indexed include scholarly journals, general magazines, newspapers fanzines, unpublished works in libraries — Ph.D. and Masters' theses, one presumes — and "specialized information services," which means Sweet Fannie Adams to me but presumably has meaning for scholars. I am staggered . . . also impressed, and delighted once more by the possession of a major reference work I am pretty sure the local public libraries will not stock, while Northwestern University *will* get it but make ac-

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cess difficult for outsiders.

There is also — this is a feast! —a thesaurus of science fiction and fantasy indexing terms, which means you can get your piece of research into concordance with accepted practice. And complete bibliographic citations are provided in both the author and subject indexes, 19,000 of which the editors claim are unique to these volumes, and 1400 of which go into books and articles in languages other than English.

This has got to be *the* key to the study of SF, and by extension of popular literature in general. You could start from scratch and go anywhere. The paper will hold up throughout your career; the type (computer strike-on printout) is easily readable and well laid-out, the test signatures appear to be sewn-in, and the covers, though paper-clad board rather than cloth, have a durable coating of some kind that resists every water-soluble liquid I tried on them. (There's a lot to this reviewing business.)

Budrys test: In the Author index, they even list my old *Locus* columns on writing, plus my obituary there for John W. Campbell, but they do not list my *F&SF* or *Galaxy* review columns, listing only my S.I.U. Press book, *Benchmarks: Galaxy Bookshelf By Algis Budrys*, but not giving its full title (as no one else does, either). They list both "Non-Literary Influences on Science Fiction," a reasonably important essay available as a booklet from Chris Drumm, and "Fiction in The Chain Mode: Nonliterary Influences on Science Fiction" as a chapter in an Academy Chicago book ostensibly edited by Gary K. Wolfe but actually heavily re-written, without consultation or any knowledge of the field, by Anita Miller, AC's editor. The AC version of my essay is a repudiated text, and should anyone ever index this column into a book similar to the Hall, I wish whoever then reads it would go to their Hall and put a little asterisk in there.

By and large, I am much content with their handling of me, and note with glee that in the subject index, my bitter outcry of AC in *Locus* at the time is duly noted. So truth will out. Especially if you don't drop it.

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Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

MEMORY WIRE, Robert Charles Wilson (Bantam, paper, 256 pp, $3.50)

Robert Charles Wilson's first novel, *A Hidden Place*, was an intense, beautiful novel of aliens trapped in America during the Great Depression. There Wilson (whose excellent short stories have appeared in this magazine) proved that at novel length he is even better, as writer and storyteller, than he is at shorter lengths.

Memory Wire, set in the near future, starts out colder than *A Hidden Place*, primarily because the main characters, Keller, Byron, and Teresa, are not wholly connected with the people around them; they are at a distance from other human beings, including the reader. (Isolation and the search for connection has been a major theme in all of Wilson's work.) As they journey to Brazil to make an illegal purchase of an oneirolith, an alien "dreaming stone," they are plunged into a dark and terrifying world of exploitation, torture, murder; a world full of people who have lost their memories — some struggling to regain them, and therefore their identities; others running to escape them, so they can hold on to some semblance of sanity.

All this sounds very literary, doesn't it? Of course it does, because *Memory Wire* is a profound and beautiful work of art. But it's also a tense thriller, as the characters are stalked by a terrifyingly believable villain, and, in the end, it is completely satisfying — no, it is *exalting* — as the main characters struggle to save their lives *and* their humanity.

Read this book for sheer entertainment, and you'll be delighted. You will also, perhaps without realizing it, be changed. With this story ry in your memory, you can't help but be more alert to your own past and to the people around you. Wilson has a healing touch. Using the bitter medicine of pity and fear, he makes his readers whole.

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PENNTERRA, Judith Moffett (Congdon & Weed, "Isaac Asimov Presents," cloth, 304 pp)

The first humans to land on Pennterra are a group of Quaker scientists; they quickly learn, to their dismay, that Pennterra is inhabited by the Hrossa, sentient creatures who have clear ideas about where and how humans must live — if they are to live at all. Being Quakers, committed to peace and harmony, the first humans accept the severe restrictions, and even learn to get along with the empathic Hrossa — until the coming of the second colony ship, whose people have no intention of accepting any limitations.

I would be disingenuous if I did not notice some obvious similarities between *Pennterra* and the most recent novel to win the Nebula award. In both, a small, religiously uniform colony lives on an alien world with sentient life. The humans are severely restricted in the area where they live and in their contact with alien lifeforms, and there is the threat of human destruction. The exosystem is surprisingly uniform, and the aliens' life cycle, as it is discovered, causes profound differences between human and alien thought. Above all, both books are thematically involved with empathy, community, bonding, species identity, and religion.

The clear similarity of these two novels has nothing to do with the quality of either — both books bring together elements that have long traditions in the field — but to my mind, the close coincidence of theme and motif between writers who had never met or read each other's work suggests that these are issues and stories whose time has come in the field of science fiction. I read Moffett's novel with wonderment and delight, both at the familiar and the new: she has brought many startling insights, a voice never before heard in this place.

Moffett is an accomplished mainstream poet, critic, and translator, whose first science fiction story, "Surviving," won a well-deserved spot on the 1986 Nebula ballot. Moffett is not "dabbling" in sf, however; she handles all the genre techniques with skill, and with great respect for her material and her audience; she deals with ideas with intelligence and passion. Nor does she suffer from literary pretentiousness: she tells a powerful tale with clarity, simplicity, and an unconcealable love for her fellowbeing. Far from being an "outsider" to science fiction, Moffett is plainly one of those rare souls whose empathy and compassion transcend all human boundaries; neither she nor her best-loved characters are truly alien anywhere.

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Moffett deals explicitly with human and alien sexual mores — but does it so tastefully that I believe adult readers will find, as I do, that this is one of the best aspects of the book. No coyness or prurience or exaggeratedly clinical distance for her.

The book is not perfect; the pace is slow, and so little happens at first, while she is setting the stage, that I grew somewhat impatient. But the details she offers are all necessary, and I can assure you that the pace becomes anything but slow by the end.

Her notion of a sentient planet is never fully explained, yet perhaps it should not be, since the planet actually seems to stand for the deepest theme in the book: the kind of God worth worshipping. Without ever getting into religious mysticism or tedious theology, *Pennterra* is nevertheless about the nature of God in relation to humankind. Moffett and I don't always see eye to eye but I learned much from her about an issue I think science fiction is uniquely suited to deal with.

This is storytelling of the best sort. The people and events of *Pennterra* will be part of me forever. Precious few writers have the vision and skill Moffett has, to write a story so ennobling and unforgettable. Welcome to science fiction, Judith Moffett: we are all enriched by your coming.

THE ILLYRIAN ADVENTURE, Lloyd Alexander (Dell, paper, 132 pp, $2.50

Lloyd Alexander's *Chronicles of Prydain*, based on the Welsh Mabinogion, are already classics of young adult fantasy. In recent years, he has turned his talents to writing "imaginary kingdom" stories — historical novels that take place in kingdoms that never existed, like the classic Graustark.

I loved Alexander's recent 18th-century trilogy, *Westmark*, *The Beggar Queen*, and *The Kestrel* (also available from Dell), a grand romantic romp through a nation in the process of democratic revolution.

Now, with *The Illyrian Adventure*, Alexander begins an open-ended series of adventure books with a delightful pair of characters: the narrator, Brinton Garrett, a staid, unadventurous researcher; and the orphaned daughter of a friend of his, a cocky, intuitive, and domineering teenager named Miss Vesper Holly, who has an astonishing capacity for getting her own way.

In search of evidence to vindicate her late father's theories about the nation of Illyria, Vesper leads Uncle Brinton to an adventure in-

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volving ancient rituals, lost giant chess pieces, political intrigues, underground tombs, and revolutionaries in disguise. It is the stuff that dreams are made of. I wish I had had this book when I was twelve. I was delighted to read it even now when I'm old.

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This superior fantasy about a seal-maiden is Delia Sherman's first F&SF story. Ms. Sherman writes that she teaches Freshman Comp and fantasy at Boston University part time and writes part time. "'Maid'," she says, "is loosely based on the ballad 'Maid on the Shore' as recorded by Martin Carthy and Frankie Armstrong."

The Maid on the Shore

By Delia Sherman

I LIVE ON A rocky coast at the easternmost tip of Newfoundland, in a stone cottage huddled under a cliff at the beach's edge. For caution's sake, my father had tumbled the stones that faced it to suggest poverty, a reeking seaweed fire and a dirt floor within. We did burn seaweed, but cleanly, in a well-vented hearth, and our floors were laid with polished stone flags softened here and there with wool rugs of my mother's weaving. The two bedrooms behind the kitchen were furnished with finely carved beds and chairs of walrus bone, and in the inmost room, rows of books lined the windowless walls.

I cannot remember a time when I did not read. Sheltered by my family's isolation, I learned of magic and of mankind from the volumes on my father's shelves. On winter nights, we would sit by the clean, salt-smelling fire — Mother, Father, me — each absorbed in a world that touched but did not invade the worlds of the others. Mother would card the wool from her sheep and spin the fluffy rolags into yarn, which she would wind, thread

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upon her handloom, and weave into fine cloth. Sometimes she sang as she worked, the cloth inspiring the song and the song the cloth, for her magic was wordless and deep and strange: the inhuman, shifting magic of the sea.

Father always sat at the other side of the hearth, a lap-desk of fine teak upon his knee, scratch-scratching with a gray goose quill on the thin pages of his notebook. His magic was all words. Spells, formulas, observations of the stars and moon, charms, cantrips, and incantations — he played with them through the winter evenings, muttering constantly under his breath as he blended spell with charm, formula with incantation to see what would come of it.

Sometimes I could coax Father out of his wizardly fog by begging him for a tale. He loved to speak of his life upon the Continent and in the fabled East, where magicians were still held in honor. But his favorite story, and mine, was of the one time when he had found himself without any words: the soft May night when he had seen my mother dancing naked on the shore. Under the moon she had danced and sung with her sisters, her body white and fluid as sea-foam, her hair black as a starless night.

Knowing that she was a seal-maiden, knowing that he should hide her sealskin if he wanted to possess her, knowing she would not return until next May Eve, my father cast aside both his knowledge and his clothing and walked naked down to the strand to meet her. As the sea takes a swimmer, the seal-maidens took him into their dance, and when the dawn-star rose and her sisters drew on their pelts to slide into the ocean, my mother held my father's hand and watched them go. Next morning she was with him still. Sometimes she would disappear for two weeks or three, but he neither asked where her sealskin was nor spied on her to find its hiding place. So she stayed with him, and within two years of that dancing, she bore him a maid-child: me.

My person and magic, because of my parentage, were strange, mixed things. Because I was a hybrid, I was barren as a mule. And my human and selkie blood mingled to give me a subtle, elusive magic that would seep away if I were to lose my virginity. Since such a fate seemed more distant than the ever-receding horizon, it troubled me not at all. On the winter evenings of my childhood, I would sit between Mother and Father on a sealskin rug, reading to myself and humming in counterpoint to Father's

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mutterings and Mother's singing. I understood and loved both their magics: Mother's songs and patterns spoke to me as though tongued; Father's words seeped into my bones like music. I was, I know now, content.

Although, as I have said, I had heard tales of mortal men in my father's books and rumor of them in my mother's songs, I never saw one until I was a woman grown. The autumn of my eighteenth year, an unlucky fisherman ran aground in a sudden squall on the rocks at the mouth of our bay. His boat splintered under the pounding of the waves, and my mother swam out and hauled him to shore, bruised, half frozen, terrified. Father insisted that she bring him into the cottage, and she dragged him through the door and dropped him beside the kitchen fire, where he lay panting and staring about him.

In that fisherman's wondering eyes, I saw my family anew. My father — small and spindle-shanked; a reader by the squint of his ice-blue eyes; a thinker by the animation of his dark, thin face. My mother — plump and white-skinned; strong, smooth muscles mounding her arms; hairs and whiteless eyes black-brown and glowing like a healthy animal's. Me — plump and white-skinned like my mother; small like my father; black-haired, blue-eyed, seal-toothed; a child to look at but for my hips and heavy breasts. The fisherman drank our broth and reluctantly accepted Father's offer of a pallet beside our hearth. When dawn came, he was gone, and one of Father's books, left carelessly on a side table, went with him, and the finely woven cloth under it as well.

Mother roared her rage at the theft, and Father talked of moving. But as the days and weeks went by, our fear ebbed. The fisherman might have died making his way overland, or lost the book or the weaving; perhaps no one believed his story of a wizard and a selkie and their witch-daughter living alone in a distant bay. Winter came. We folded our sheep, stored the potatoes and dried the beans from Mother's garden, salted the last of the fish she had caught for us with her sharp seal's teeth, and settled in gratefully to our usual winter pursuits.

At midwinter, in the dark aftermath of a heavy snow, men came to hunt us out. Even now, I wake whimpering and bleating like a seal cub from dreams of the fishermen clubbing at my father until his blood pooled on the kitchen floor. Three of them came after Mother and me, their clubs uplifted and their eyes shiny with fear and lust. We roared and hurled ourselves at them. There was nothing in me of my father that night, but

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only a seal's fury and a seal's desire to rend and tear. We tore the throats from four of them, my mother and I, while the rest fled yammering from our cottage.

When all was quiet, we bundled their torn bodies out of the kitchen and down to the ocean, where the tide took them out to sea for the fish to eat. We scrubbed the blood from the polished flags with melted snow and fine sand. Then my mother stripped off her shawl and her linen bodice, her woolen skirt and her petticoats, and, taking the sealskin rug from the study floor, wrapped it around her naked shoulders.

I had always known that the rug upon which I sat and drowsed on winter days was Mother's sealskin, for the pelt smelled of her and never wore thin or lost its living gloss. From time to time, it and she would disappear together to lie upon the ice floes, and I would lie on ordinary sealskin before the study fire to support the fiction of my father's ignorance. But never before that day had I seen her go from woman to seal. One moment she was standing before the kitchen fire, a plump woman draped in a sealskin cloak. Then she seemed to flow, to melt into the floor like candle wax, and became a sad-eyed seal, sleek and whiskered. Urgently, she whistled to me, and I helped her drag my father's body across the rocky beach to the water, where she towed him out to sea under the solemn moon. I saw her from time to time thereafter, but only as a brown seal swimming out in the bay. At high tide she might come near and leave a fish on the rocky beach, but she never came ashore again. After a few years she stopped coming altogether. I think the sealers must have taken her.

After that midwinter's night I lived alone in the stone cottage. I suppose the fishermen reckoned me dead or swum out to sea with my selkie mother. In any case, they never returned. Suns rose and set, moons waxed and waned, snows fell and melted, and still I lived a maid on the shore, tending my mother's sheep and garden, reading my father's books, fishing for salmon and hunting for partridge and wild goose when I tired of shellfish and mutton.

Quiet as it was, it was life that suited me. Oh, sometimes I longed for some purpose for my magic, some reason to use my knowledge and power to an end other then charming fish to my hook or rabbits to my snare. When I raised a small offshore breeze to blow away a bank of clouds, I might be tempted to whistle up a tempest; when I squeezed a few drops of

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rain from a high cloud in a dry summer, I might be tempted to call down a flood. But there was no one near to be blown away or drowned, no one to display my powers for. Like the seasonal yearnings of my body, my ambition was a useless and unwanted legacy, which, for the most part, I did not brood over.

But I did brood over the fishermen. My father's daughter knew that they had acted from fear, from distrust, perhaps even from winter boredom. But my mother's daughter recognized an ancient enemy, and instinctively, unreasonably feared that they would return. Over the years, bitterness crept to high tide in my soul, tainting it like a well dug too close to the ocean. Time runs oddly for a wizard's child who does not age like a human woman or seal, so I do not know how long I lived alone on that rocky shore. But it was many and many a long year before men came again to break my solitude and my peace.

Again it was late autumn, the time of the worst storms, and a northeastern gale hunted early snow across the uplands. The gale blew for three days, whipping the ocean to a terrible frenzy of freezing water and stinging foam, scouring the gulls from the sky and driving both me and my sheep into shelter. On the third day the wind turned northwest, as it always does in these latitudes, bringing to my bay high tides, floating islands of kelp, and a trespasser.

I had been gathering a harvest of seaweed to cover and feed my garden, and near sundown was laboring back over the rocks, carrying a bundle of it on my back. Although I am almost as strong as a selkie, the sodden weight of the kelp dragged heavily at my shoulders, and I was forced to rest. As I stretched, my hands to the small of my back, I looked out across the bay. There floated a ship — a clipper by her proud sleekness — three-masted, many-sailed, and badly maimed by the storm. Her mainmast was down, her mizzenmast was splinted, and only a few rags of canvas flew from her foremast. Wearily, she rocked at anchor, and sailors swarmed over her like rats, cutting free the useless rigging and clearing the decks of the storm's debris.

As I gaped, my eye was caught by the one still figure in all the bustle, standing aft by the taffrail and holding a glass to his eye. I stood transfixed in its sights, arms akimbo, breasts thrust forward with unintended boldness. I could feel his eyes upon me, and their touch, even at that distance, was intimate and unwelcome. Shuddering, I bent to my bundle, hurried

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back to my cottage, and barred the door behind me.

By nightfall I had fretted myself into a rage. Was I not the daughter of a magician and a skin-changer, a sorceress in my own right, mistress of word and song and woven pattern? Why should I fear a crippled ship and her exhausted and battered crew? But memory mocked me with visions of a helpless fisherman and blood upon the kitchen floor, and I tossed between revenge and retreat, hatred and fear, until at last I fell asleep by my banked fire.

Early next morning a rapping came at my door. I started awake, the hair at my neck rising and prickling. Whoever it was knocked again, shy and soft, as though unsure of a welcome. Would a ravager, a pirate tap so mannerly at my front door? A third knock, weaker yet. Curious, I put on my shawl, drew the bolts, and opened. A young man stood before me.

"Aye?" I said coolly, folding my shaking hands under my apron.

"Ma'am," the young man said, and bowed awkwardly. He was a full head taller than I, with a sailor's blue eyes and a pale beard like a gosling's down blurring his cheeks. "Captain Pelican's compliments, ma'am, and may we please draw water from your stream? We've been a mortal long time at sea, and never a dipperful of clean water do we have aboard."

He was young and respectful, afraid only of frightening me, and my terror faded before his gaze. Mistress of myself once more, I made a shooing movement with my hand as though he were a gosling indeed. "Help 'eeself, boy. Water's free." I was careful to speak the common coast dialect, as though I were an ordinary fishwife with nothing strange or wonderful about me that must be feared or spoiled. But as they dipped the water from my stream into small barrels, I could feel the sailors' stares. The young man lingered by my door.

"I am Thomas Fletcher, ma'am, first mate of the clipper *Cape Town Maid*. We have sailed from China, around the Cape of Good Hope to Salem with a cargo of gold, porcelain, spices, and silks. Our captain is Elias Pelican." He faltered, reddened, continued. "He asks, ma'am, for grain if you can spare it, and news of forests with trees suitable for a jury mast, for we will never make Salem in this state." He smiled warmly down at me, and I found that I was smiling warmly in return.

"There do be fir above, and pine. It be up along the moor and not easy found. I'll lead 'ee," I said, wondering to hear my own voice betraying me.

The shadows were short by the time we had trekked over the moorland

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I dreamed of the bulls roaring on the beaches, of the remembered salt of human blood on my lips.

to a respectable stand of fir, and had lengthened almost to dusk before we returned, for the seamen bickered over the choice of a tree, then fought over the best way of felling and stripping it. My father had told me how seamen must work together, each individual becoming a part of a human mechanism called "crew," harmonious in action as canvas and wind, capstan and rope. As I listened to the sailors curse and pick at each other, I thought that this particular crew was no more harmonious, either in action or in voice, than a beach of bull seals in rut.

"Damn your eyes," shouted Mr. Fletcher at last when two of them had nearly come to blows over the angle and height of the cut they were to make. "Do you want the captain ashore?"

His words fell on the crew like a fog. Faces grayed; eyes dulled; voices fell utterly silent. Working quickly now, the men felled the tree, stripped it, and hauled it across the moor to the beach. Only their bodies and hands spoke to me, who knew from my mother how to understand the wordless speech of wind and fish and sheep, and told me that they were afraid.

Watching them stumble and fumble, I could not imagine how these men had survived the passage of the Horn without hanging themselves on the rigging or tumbling from the crosstrees. Indeed, some of them might have recently fallen from a lesser height, for they moved stiffly. One young man, with a bruised face and an angry eye, wore a shirt marked across the back with rusty stains that darkened and gleamed wetly as he worked.

Hating as I hated, fearing what I hate to fear, how could I lead these men so faithfully and so coolly watch them work? Now I can say that they gave me a new riddle to puzzle over, a new set of facts to mull, and that I had long been bored without being conscious of it. At the time I hardly knew how to account for my own actions. All day I watched the sailors labor over the fir tree; that night I dreamed of my mother standing by the shore, ankle-deep in the tide, changing. The strange thing was that she never became wholly seal or woman, but remained mutable: a woman's face and torso might end in a seal's hind flippers; a sleek, whiskered head might dart above a woman's full white breasts. I dreamed, too, of the bulls roaring on the beaches, of the remembered salt of human blood on my lips, the

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jar of human bones between my teeth. More than once, I woke sweating and trembling, only to slip again into uneasy dreaming. But when morning came, I opened the door to Mr. Fletcher's timid knock and asked him in most civilly to take a cup of chamomile tea.

He sat by the fire in my father's chair, nursing the thick brown mug between his hands and casting curious glances at the polished wooden furniture, the woven cloths, the pewter and china ranked on the heavy oak dresser.

"This puts me in mind of my mother's kitchen," he said at last. "You live here alone?"

"Aye." I considered not answering his implied question, but thought my silence might offend him. I did not want to offend him. He was a lovely man, strong and clean-limbed, and his sun-burnished face warmed my dark kitchen. "Our mam and dad drowned," I said. "It be two winters since, now."

His pity was quick and sweet to hear. "Poor girl, so young to be left alone," he said gently, not knowing that I was far older than he. "Why did you not leave this lonely place? There are fishing villages up and down this coast would welcome you, and men who would gladly marry you."

"Here I were born, and here 'tis fitty I stay," I said shortly. "Tell I, Mr. Fletcher, where be your mother's kitchen and what set 'ee to sailing?"

So he told me of the snug clapboard house in Gloucester, of his father who had followed the whales until his ship was lost, of his mother who had listened dry-eyed to her son's decision to serve the same harsh mistress. He had been a cabin boy on a whaler, an apprentice on a merchantman, a boatswain, and a mate. "I've turned my hand to most things, and know how a ship should be run. My last captain advanced me when his first mate was washed overboard, and it was as first mate I came aboard *The Cape Town Maid*, two years ago."

"Two years be a mortal long time afloat," I said. The animation faded from his face, and he shrugged heavily.

"Hast a sweetheart?"

More heavily still, he nodded, then fumbled in his waistcoat and brought out a tarnished locket, which he opened and held out to me. "Nancy Bride," he said, low and a little shaky. "The sweetest girl in Gloucester."

Being a black paper silhouette, the portrait could have been of any young girl with a straight nose and ringlets, but I read in the angle of his

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head and in the trembling of his broad hand that he saw his Nancy's loving face and no other smiling from that anonymous snippet. Suddenly, I was out of patience, even angry.

"Her be a clean-featured maid," I said. "Does 'ee think her'll have waited on 'ee all this long time?"

Mr. Fletcher flushed, snapped the locket shut, and restored it to his bosom. "She's as true as death, ma'am," he said stiffly. "I'd stake my soul on her."

I hastened to make up the ground I'd lost. "I'm thinking her be a lucky maid. So ye'll be a married man as soon as ever the banns can be called?"

"No," he said.

There was a long and uncomfortable pause. What ailed the man? I could make nothing of his sadness, except that it had nothing to do with me. He was stirring now in the chair as if preparing to leave. To keep him, I said, "'Tis an odd thing the captain's not come ashore."

Mr. Fletcher mumbled something into his waistcoat that I asked him to repeat. "I said, 'it's not the oddest thing about him,' ma'am." He hesitated; I waited. He had the air of a sheep at a gate — afraid to move, eager to be on the other side.

Slowly, he began to speak. "Although he's a merchant, he refuses to take paying passengers on board. He doesn't seem to care how many seasoned sailors there are among the crews he buys from the crimps, providing they come cheap enough. Why, there's hardly four men knew a belaying pin from a capstan spar when they shipped aboard, though they found out soon enough which falls the hardest on a man's back." He was fairly through the gate now and trotting.

"Two years is a long time at sea, as you've said, ma'am, and it's longer yet if you're sailing under a captain like Pelican. He's one who likes to put the cat among the pigeons just to see the feathers fly — never mind if the cat scratches or the pigeons peck. He'll order the scuppers cleaned by the dawn watch if the fancy takes him, or the deck holystoned at midnight, and it's twenty lashes for any sailor who might be a thought slow at leaping to obey. He's too free with the lash, and too free with his fists and his knife. Many's the time I've heard him say he'd rather flog sailors than eat a hot dinner, even though flogging has been against the law for thirty years or more. He's ordered ten strokes for a dirty shirt, though the men have no place to wash their linen except the scuppers, and he's filthy as bilge water himself."

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Once Mr. Fletcher had begun, there was no more hope of stopping him than of turning a starving sheep from rich pasture. He was angry now, fairly flaming with it, and his sparkling eyes and flushed cheeks were a pleasure to watch.

"He tied Carbone high in the mainmast rigging once when a fever kept him from coming up with his watch. 'The sea air'll cure him,' he said, and left him there all night. Next morning, Carbone was all but dead, and two days later, he died. Round the Horn's a hard passage, and you expect to lose a dozen men or so to sickness and accident, but we've buried that many from dysentery and lash weals that have gone septic, and lost as many again overboard." Mr. Fletcher shook his head and fell silent.

"Could'ee not have cut down and bade Captain Bucko go whistle?" I asked curiously.

Mr. Fletcher stretched his eyes wide. "That would be mutiny, ma'am. It's no part of a first mate's job to countermand his captain's orders."

I doubted that it was part of a first mate's job to hang and flog his shipmates for no good reason but the captain's fancy, though I did not say so. But my scorn must have shown in my face, for as suddenly as it had broken out, his spate of words dried, and before I knew it, he was on his feet, thanking me for the tea and out the door.

My father had always said that confession was a relief to the soul, but telling me of the horrors aboard *The Cape Town Maid* had not relieved Mr. Fletcher. After that morning's confidences, he stayed well away from my door. He was certainly nowhere to be found when six of my sheep were stolen from the fold and slaughtered on the beach. "Captain's orders," one squint-eyed runt told me when I stormed out to confront the butchers. "Ye mun tak' it up wi' him."

I spun around to the bay and glared out at the *Maid*, rocking quietly in the swell. A familiar figure stood in the stern; the sun winked from the barrel of the glass he held. Outraged and terrified, I helplessly shook both my fists at that brazen eye and fled back to my cottage.

The next day they were finished at last, having taken four days to do a two-day job of work. The mast had been trimmed, banded with iron, floated out to *The Cape Town Maid*, stepped, and rigged. There was much going back and forth from shore with barrels and game and strings of fish. By sundown the strand was empty at last, and I ventured out of my cottage to care for my remaining sheep.

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The clipper lay at anchor, her masts rerigged and proud against the rosy sky. Across the quiet bay came the boom of Captain Pelican's harsh voice as he harangued his men. I rejoiced that they'd be gone by morning so that I could sleep easy again. But I kept peering out my window at the *Maid*'s moonlit shadow, restless and angry and sure that my anger would not simply sail with the clipper out of the bay.

Here, I told myself, was a use for my powers at last. Perhaps I should send lightning to strike the captain as he strutted on the poop; perhaps I should simply call up a storm and sink *The Cape Town Maid* with all hands aboard. I was still debating alternatives, when Mr. Fletcher knocked once more on my door.

He was cold, still, correct, as though his indiscretion and my scorn still rankled in his mind. "You're been so kind, ma'am, and so generous with the water and the sheep and all, that the captain asks you to come on board to view the cargo, take a glass of sherry wine, and be properly thanked. He will not take 'no' for an answer."

I looked past Mr. Fletcher at the faces of the men who accompanied him. All of them looked uneasy, but some looked eager as well, their eyes bright and flat like the eyes of those fishermen so many years ago.

"Nay, sir, no need for thanks," I said. "Water's free, I told 'ee, and help is, too. Though the captain could pay for they sheep, come 'pon that."

"The captain wishes to convey his thanks himself, ma'am," Mr. Fletcher repeated stubbornly. "He'll settle the matter of the sheep with you on the *Maid*." And he began to extoll the rareness and beauty of the cargo as if to dazzle me with the prospect of some rare and unnamed reward for my kindness.

I didn't listen to a word he said. Was the man daft, or did he think me so? A glass of sherry wine, indeed. If I went out to that ship, I would never return to the shore. A woman is not bad luck while a ship is at anchor, and no doubt the captain intended me to be dead and overboard long before the *Maid* sailed on the dawn tide.

As he spoke, Mr. Fletcher began to sweat and to avoid my eyes, and his voice took on a pleading note. He seemed to have settled with himself that he would not take me onto the ship by force. If he could persuade me, well, then, I would get what I deserved. But if he had to pick me up and carry me, protesting, his conscience might force him to defiance.

For a moment I considered pressing Mr. Fletcher into making a choice

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between the two sides of his sense of propriety. But I had a curiosity to meet this Captain Pelican.

So, "Thankee kindly, sir," I said as his eloquence began to run dry. "I'll be pleased to take sherry wine with your captain." And I set briskly off down the strand, trailed by Mr. Fletcher and the sailors.

They helped me into the stern of the longboat and rowed out to the ship. As we approached, I could see her figurehead clearly: a naked woman supporting her massive breasts in her hands and leering out at the innocent sea. We came alongside the ship, a ladder was lowered, and dozens of hard, eager hands pulled me onto the deck.

Captain Pelican was on the bridge, and Mr. Fletcher led me up to him ceremoniously. The captain was an imposing man, over six feet tall, fleshy in tight, dark trousers and frock coat. Above his high collar and frayed cravat, his face was dark, craggy, pitted like granite; his hair, iron-colored with dirt and grease, hung lank around his ears. He spat a brown stream of tobacco juice at my feet. "Please to meet you," he said.

I dropped a curtsy. My eyes were downcast as though with awe or fear, but I was trying very hard not to laugh. He was so ridiculous after all, whipping his sailors to show them that he was fearless and lawless as the ocean he sailed upon. But his swanking could not fool me, for under the reek of sweat and gin and old salt, I could smell fear upon him sharp as a knife.

Captain Pelican hitched up my chin with his finger and leered into my face. His pale eyes were rheumy. "Mr. Fletcher has pumped you some bilge about sherry wine and thanks," he said, "but I'll wager you know well I intend you no such courtesy. You'll spend a watch or two in my bunk, doing what a woman does best, then I've promised my crew they'll get what's left."

He stopped and showed me his tobacco-stained teeth, waiting, I suppose, for some sign of revulsion or terror. I imagined turning in his arms and tearing out his throat, or singing such a sea-spell that he would face the world with a walrus's head upon his shoulders, and I clapped my hands together like a child.

"O, thankee, sir, thankee," I cried. "Thee hast no notion what weary company a maidenhead be, and no proper man for to lighten me of un."

Captain Pelican looked taken aback by this speech, and not so happy as one might expect. "Well," he said, and cleared his throat. "Always glad

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to be of service to a lady. Some sherry wine?"

I clasped my hands over the greasy arm of his jacket and smiled. "Come, my dear, thee ben't shy" The top of my head fell short of his collarbone, and he was forced to crane over to look into my face.

"There's no hurry," he said hoarsely. Without taking his eyes from me, he shouted for Mr. Fletcher to bring the wine and two glasses, then led to the wooden bench that ran along the stern of the ship.

By this time I could all but taste the captain's blood on my lips. I sank onto the bench and into his arms; the sour odor of sweat, tobacco, and stale gin that hung around him made my head spin. He bent to kiss me, his massive head and shoulders black against the silver moonlight, his breath rank in the clean, salt air. Eagerly, I raised my mouth to him.

"Captain Pelican, sir," came Mr. Fletcher's prim voice. "Your sherry wine, sir."

The captain released me unkissed and damned Mr. Fletcher for a fish-buggering old woman. I sighed; the captain poured and handed me a glass of wine.

Sipping the sherry gave me time to reflect. The moonlight glittered at me from the watchful, rat-bright eyes of the crewmen. While they might stand by and cheer while I tore out their captain's throat, they were unlikely to set me safely ashore when I was done. Lust for my body or lust for my blood, both were alike to them. If I killed their captain, his crew was apt simply to skewer me where I sat, and throw his body and mine overboard, and good riddance to the pair of us. Unless, of course, I prevented them.

Captain Pelican finished his wine, laid aside his glass, and began to fumble at my bosom. I smiled, took a deep breath, and began to sing. Startled, he drew back his hands, lifted them to muzzle me, hesitated, and then, as the spell caught him, dropped them into his lap. I could feel him strain at the charm, testing his mortal will against my witch's power. But he could not break it.

My song was the lament that the heart of every seaport woman sings when her man sets sail. Its notes were love and longing and the dark night watches when a woman's spirit is at low tide and every breeze seems to sigh with the last prayers of drowning sailors. My seal's voice, low-pitched and resonant, carried its plaint to each crewman's bones. Not only the captain, sitting stiff and resistant by my side, but every man on that ship heard my song, and in my wordless melody, heard the ceaseless calling of

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his wife, sweetheart, sister, mother. From the foredeck came the sound of weeping.

Gradually, I wove into my song the slow, sleepy brush of waves over sand. Though he fought with all the strength of his will, the captain's lids drooped, and he began to slip sideways on the bench, the hilt of his sword poking into his ribs. Wind breathed in the rigging and sent small waves shushing gently against the hull. *The Cape Town Maid* slept.

Now, I thought, and turned to the silent figure slumped and wrinkled against the stern railing. I rolled his heavy body off the bench and tore open his coat and his shirt. Shadow caught in the folds of his untanned throat as if already it ran with blood. He's a monster, I thought as I crouched over him; I have wanted to kill him since I first saw his ship in my bay, and I *will* kill him. Now.

I lowered my mouth to his throat. His skin against my tongue was foul and slick, like rotting fish; I straightened and spat, and slowly my anger seeped from me. Words chased one another through my mind, cold and bright and quick: to murder will make me human; to flee will make me animal; there are more kinds of virginity than one.

The moon was slipping down the mainmast, barring the deck with black shadows. The webbed rigging cast intricate patterns on Captain Pelican's face, and moonlight silvered the hair on his bared chest. I brushed my fingers over the thatch, and it gave under my touch, springy as uncarded wool. Although his pelt was thick, there was not enough hair to weave a mat from. But it might be worked into a larger pattern. Humming thoughtfully, I gave the hair a little tug. It came easily free from his skin.

Singing as I worked, I opened and laid back the wings of his coat and linen shirt, then plucked all the hair from his chest. Under my busy hands, the naked skin shone almost luminous in the moonglow, its white expanse broken only by the faint shadows of his nipples. I cupped them in my palms; the flesh beneath them stretched, softened, swelled.

Song welled up within me, flowed from my lips and fingers, guiding and guided by the movement of my hands. I caressed the knot from his throat, stroked the stubble from his cheeks. Wherever my hands passed, the texture of his skin became finer, denser. When I had done with his face, my fingers wandered down across the heavy, round breasts to unclasp his belt. My palm rested on the captain's belly; my witch-song sank into his flesh. The world narrowed to the beating of my blood and his and

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the echo of the tide flowing in the notes of my song. Then Captain Pelican gave a great cry. It flew from his altered throat like a sea gull's plaintive scream, then died away to a whimper. So, too, died my song.

I knelt shivering on the deck until my limbs unknotted, then rose and found my way to the captain's cabin. From a small sea chest, I took six pieces of gold as payment for my slaughtered sheep, a brick of black tea, and a length of sea-green silk. When I came up again, I searched for Mr. Fletcher among the coiled ropes and the snoring sailors, and found him folded like a sleeping sheep at the foot of a companionway. From him I took the tarnished locket that held the silhouette of Nancy Bride, and his clasp knife.

The captain lay in the stern, a faint, pale glimmer against the dark wooden boards. I stove in five of the ship's longboats and, freighting the sixth with my booty, lowered it to the sea. The moon had long since sunk behind the cliffs and set. By the time I pushed off, dead night shrouded *The Cape Town Maid* and her slumbering crew. In a little while the tide would turn, the sky would lighten, and the crew would wake and sail the *Maid* out of my bay. They should be halfway to Salem before they found their captain. As I paddled the longboat back to the shore, I wondered what they would make of what they found.

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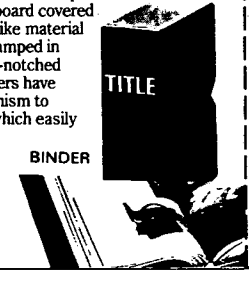

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Kate Wilhelm makes a welcome return to these pages with an inventive tale about Joey Doyle, who works at a small job but looks for something much bigger, and begins by attending a night school for people who think science is magic. Ms. Wilhelm's most recent book is THE HILLS ARE DANCING, and she recently completed a comic fantasy novel titled CRAZY TIME.

The Disassembler

By Kate Wilhelm

BY THE TIME Herman and Joey finished the Walker apartment, snow was falling hard. Gray snow, black before it hit the street.

Joey packed up the gear silently, and tried not to hear his uncle's voice.

"Remember when I was a kid, the snow, for crissake, was white! Hear that, white! And it stayed white most all day, long enough to go sledding on, for crissake!"

With one eye he seemed to be staring at his nephew while the other was taking in the street, the skyline, the falling flakes. He was sixty, stooped, thin, and tall; a big-little-businessman, he called himself. A tic in his cheek pulled his mouth into an involuntary smile at odd moments. He ticked and smiled at the weather and at Joey. In the distance, New York was gone, swallowed by a wall of snow clouds; here in Hoboken, the streetlights had come on and the blackening snow smelled of chemicals. Or he did, Joey thought. He closed the back of the truck hard. The sign there said: Herman Giono, Extermination Is Our Business. Below the let-

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tering was a four-inch roach on its back, many legs stiffly upright, two X's where eyes should have been. Herman had painted it himself.

Herman was revving the motor by the time Joey had finished and climbed in beside him. They would skip the Geztner place and head for home, Herman said, and started to drive. They slipped, skidded, and swerved all the way.

The Gionos had bought a real house back in the fifties, and although the subdivision at that time had sprouted a field of identical houses, by now differences were visible: here a deck, there a new room, an upstairs over a garage. Herman had enlarged his garage and had added a shower at the rear of it. Ethel would not allow either of them inside the house until they had showered and changed. A cold draft blew through the garage, through the tin shower stall. Herman always went first, and usually he was in the living room having a beer by the time Joey was done. This afternoon, Joey found him at the living room door, listening to Ethel and her friend Mamie.

"Make him take you, darling. He can afford it. Not hot enough to swim, of course, but the beaches are wonderful, and the sunshine! We had this little cottage all to ourselves, right on the beach, the kids out there at the crack of dawn practically, all day in the sun, and fish! My God, the fish Frankie caught! Some of them ugly as sin! No clue what they were, not a clue."

"He wouldn't go. You know how he is. Always business, nothing but business. All he thinks about."

"He'd love it! We had these two garbage cans at the side of the cottage. I'd take out the bags and toss a shell at the cans and not move a muscle until the roaches ran away. You touch the cans, and they run and the lizards jump on them, like a circus or something. Every time. Big as rats, some of them. You could hear them at night, like galloping around the house. First night we were there, I go to the bathroom, and there's one of them in the tub, looking up out of the drain, nearly filled the whole opening. I thought I'd die! Frankie kept saying it'd be heaven for someone in Herman's line. You smell something?"

"They must of come home early. Hermie, you there?"

Joey ducked out, down to the basement where he had his room and his little laboratory, separated from the washing machine by a sheet hanging from a clothesline. On Tuesday and Thursday evenings, he had classes; on

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other nights he worked on his correspondence courses or his project.

The next Friday, he stared at his uncle in disbelief. "Florida? You're kidding!"

"Joey, I asked around. What she was saying, Mamie? It's for real. Business ain't been that great, you know? Great? Hell, it's lousy. That's a joke, Joey. Lousy. Get it?"

"But my classes? You know I don't want to stay in the business with you. It's just until I'm out of school. You know, helping out in exchange for room and board. I don't want to go off to Florida."

"What's a matter? You think they don't got good schools in Florida or something? Lots of great schools, really great ones, Joey. Look, we go down there, and in a couple years we make a killing. That's a joke, Joey. Killing. Get it?"

"But I've got this project going. I told you, they're letting me use the equipment because I'm willing to clean up. That's because they know me here. I'd have to start over somewhere else. It takes years for them to get to know you and trust you like that. Years!"

"Joey, you're young. Believe me, you're young. Like only yesterday out of the egg, that young. So we do really good business, and in a couple years I retire. I ain't so young, Joey. Couple years, I'll be ready to hang it all up. And you'll have the dough to go full-time, day and night if you want to."

"But—"

"Joey, tell me this. How long's it going to take you to become a physician the way you're going now? Ten years?"

"Physicist. Seven years. And I'm not that young anymore. I'm twenty-seven!"

"A baby, Joey. Still wet, you're so young. And all's you got to do is keep on taking the same courses by mail. They care where they send the stuff? Here? Florida? The South Pole, for crissake! Who cares? And tell you that, instead of two night classes, let's spring for three. You work thirty hours instead of forty, like now, and go for three. Deal?"

"I don't know, Uncle Herman. You don't need me. You can hire a helper down there."

"Yeah, sure I can, for crissake. I could a hire someone here, but I promised your mother. And that's a sacred promise, Joey. You work for me, I take care of you. You got another job lined up here? A place to stay? You got it, fine.

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You ain't got it, fine, too, Joey. I mean, whatever you want, you got, and it's fine with me. But the thing is, is I ain't going to be here. I'm going to be there." He mock-poked Joey in the ribs then. "For crissake, kid, math's math. They don't teach a different kind of math or science or English or nothing else, far's I know, one place to the other."

Joey hated it when his uncle talked about his mother like that, as if she were dead and buried. In fact, she lived in Montana with her second husband, and they were doing O.K. growing wheat. She would have let him stay on forever, she had often said, but his stepfather.... She had defended Joey right up to the end. "It isn't how fast you learn," she had declared, her arms crossed over her chest, her face set, "it's what you learn. And he's a learner, sooner or later."

And that was the truth, Joey often thought. He always caught on sooner or later. At first, during his early years in higher education, he had realized that the questions he learned the answers to, and the problems he learned how to solve, were not necessarily the same ones that would be on tests. And he had learned that most of his professors had only three or four different tests, and eventually he got pretty good grades. He had to agree with his uncle that it made little difference where he continued his higher education, since most of it was by correspondence anyway, but this move was upsetting in spite of that. It was his special project that he wanted very much to complete.

He had not always wanted to become a physicist. At first he had wanted to be a chemist. As a young child he loved mixing things together to see what would happen. After the first time he made himself violently ill by smelling a mixture, he made a cat or dog smell whatever his current project was. When the dog died, he pretended he had found it dead in the driveway, poisoned by a neighbor, probably. He had gone on to simple explosives and started a grass fire that got out of hand and needed four hundred volunteers to control finally. He had dabbled with archaeology, and a farmhand had broken his leg in a hole and sued his stepfather for five thousand dollars. Then he had discovered physics, and especially the various forces that bound all matter, and ever since, his intentions had not wavered. He would discover the secret of the weak forces and control them.

Five years ago he had come to Hoboken to live with his uncle and work for him while continuing his education. When he objected to using the

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chemicals, his uncle had laughed.

"Joey, Joey, would I ask you to do something dangerous? You, flesh of my family's flesh, blood of my family's blood. You're like my own son, Joey. Them coveralls and that mask, they're for show, Joey. The customers expect it. That's all. Show. Look, this time, years ago, I was demonstrating for the Pullman people. You know, the train cars that have beds in them? Anyways, the head honcho don't show in time, and the other guys tell me to go ahead and start, and you know what I do, Joey? Listen up, kid. I got this jigger glass, and I pour the stuff in it, and down the hatch it goes. Just like that."

His one eye was fixed on Joey while the other kept watch, constantly shifting. He ticked and smiled, and even giggled when Joey backed up a step.

"Then the head honcho shows up after all, and I do the whole act again. Joey, would I do that if it was dangerous? Come on, kid, use your head."

That was when Joey realized where his research could take him. The next day he asked one of his teachers what cockroaches were actually made of. The instructor looked at him strangely and said something not very helpful — protein and water and chitin. . . . No, Joey had persisted, basically what were they made of? Things like copper and oxygen and hydrogen and carbon? The teacher had glanced about quickly, as if searching for someone, but Joey had waited until they were alone, not wanting anyone to suspect what his research involved. Uh, yes, the teacher had admitted then. Exactly right, Joey. And he had his confirmation, his go-ahead, the green light. Not just weak forces, but the weak forces that hold living organisms together; that became his goal.

He knew that a certain pitch of sound could shatter a glass, and he knew that it did not actually reach across the room and break the glass physically, but merely destroyed the weak forces that bound the elements of glass together. And he knew that sunlight could destroy certain materials left out in it. Some plastics came apart after only a month or two. Again, the weak forces had been destroyed, he reasoned, and he began to work on a way to combine light and sound to make his instrument that could be turned on and off at will and destroy the weak forces almost instantly. Something like white noise, but inaudible to human ears, and something like a laser light, but invisible to human eyes. He was staggered by the magnitude of the task he outlined for himself, but he plunged

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in; and now, years later, he was almost finished, almost ready to start testing.

And there was Lunamoth, whose real name was Martha; but anyone named Martha, she had explained, not only had a right, but practically an obligation, to change it.

"Joey," she had said mournfully at their last meeting, "it has to be good-bye, no matter how much it hurts. We have to think of the children, not ourselves, my dearest darling."

"What children?"

"Our unborn children, the progeny we don't dare conceive and bear. Joey, I read this story where a German boy turned into a cockroach. It was a cautionary tale, a warning spelled out so clear it's a wonder the chemical companies don't burn it at the source. I guess most people just think it's funny or something, but if you read between the lines, that's the message."

"Ah—"

"He had a mutation, from too many chemicals. He turns into a cockroach, and that's that."

"But—"

"It's been beautiful with you, Joey. I never knew anyone could be so wonderful — especially outside, with you standing downwind, the wind blowing your hair straight back, like an Indian watching the first traitorous white skinner — but Joey, we have to face reality. The wind has to stop blowing one day. Help me, Joey. Please help make it a clean break. Let me walk away, and don't call me, don't hang on, and I won't look back. I'll just walk away with my head up and keep the image of you with your hair blowing straight out."

His problem, he decided a week later, was that as a training physicist he had not learned many other skills yet. There were other jobs that paid minimum — washing dishes, cleaning up, things like that — but he could not live on minimum and go to school and eat and see Lunamoth and finish his project. He straightened his shoulders, threw his head back to let the wind rush through his hair, and faced a bleak and lonely future. Behind him, people moved to one side or the other. At that moment the magnitude of his discovery overwhelmed him; it was as if he had understood it only piecemeal before, and suddenly the entire picture was in his head. He realized he had needed this interlude, this cleansing process of being hurt, of being abandoned, for his brain to process all the pieces he had been

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After the bombs got everybody, there'd be roaches and rats left; he'd bet on the roaches . . .

feeding it over so many years. He felt like the guy who thought of the circle while he was stepping on the bus, or the other guy who could hear the whole song in his head before he got anywhere near the band. He felt as if the two jugs in front of him all the time suddenly had become faces, with noses and eyes and everything, only he had been too blind to see them before.

His work had taken on a feverish quality then. He had borrowed more and more equipment from the lab, worked later and later hours, and now was only weeks away from real testing.

On the Tuesday after his uncle Herman announced his intention to move to Florida, Joey was running late. They had been held up in the Saracen's apartment. Mrs. Saracen had collected hundreds of dead roaches that she claimed she had killed only days after their last visit. And what did they think she was paying them for? Roaches that had miraculous revivals hours after they left? She watched them work, watched them empty out junk from under cabinets, and spray and replace the junk, watched them saturate floors and doorframes and windowsills and baseboards and walls behind pictures, until Joey had been too late to gather up the stuff he had intended to replace in the lab that night.

Joey was thinking about the paper bag of roaches that Mrs. Saracen had thrust at his uncle. He had put it on the seat between them, and on the way home had rolled down the window and tossed it out. "Boy, does she bug me," he had said. "That's a joke, Joey. Bug me. Get it?"

"They were resistant, weren't they?" Joey asked.

"Who knows? We'll give her a different mix next time."

"And they'll get resistance to that, and to the next and the next, won't they?"

"For crissake, Joey, they'll come up with new stuff faster than the roaches get used to it. Always have. Don't worry, kid, between the boys in the labs and us in the field, we'll get the bugs out. That's a joke, Joey. Get the bugs out. Get it?"

But the roaches would win, Joey knew. He was brooding about them as he walked into school that night. Some guy said that after the bombs got

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everybody, there'd be roaches and rats left. Eating each other, he supposed; and even in that contest, he would bet on the roaches. Good living in killing roaches, his uncle always said, because you can count on them; they'll be back next month. And that was O.K., everyone expected that —but not the next day or two, or the next week. Customers got mad if they came back that soon.

Joey liked going to night school, liked the informality of the adult education program. They were not so stuffy here, paid little attention to high school transcripts and past grades and requirement tests. He knew that eventually he would have to go to MIT or someplace like that for really advanced study, but meanwhile he could get the basics over with where he was comfortable. He did not think it strange that no one was lingering in the halls when he entered the building, because he was running so late, but he knew something was wrong as soon as two men in suits came out of an office and stopped him.

They ushered him into a classroom where the desks had been pushed to the rear and a long table had been brought in. At the table were several of the instructors he had come to know, or recognize. He waved to his physics teacher. There were two strangers at the table. One of them motioned him closer, and nodded at the men who had brought him inside. They patted him down thoroughly and gave him a little push.

"What's going on? What's wrong?"

"Name, please?"

"Joey. Joey Doyle. What's happening?"

The man consulted with the physics teacher, and they both looked in a folder and then back to Joey. "We'd like to see identification, please."

Joey pulled out his wallet and showed them his driver's license and registration card, looking from his teacher back to the other man in bewilderment. His teacher shook his head very slightly at the other man, and he waved Joey away.

They escorted him down the corridor to an auditorium where it appeared the entire student population was seated. Half a dozen men stood around the edge of the room watching them all.

"Hey, what's going on?" Joey asked the man he sat next to.

"Not so loud. Rumor is that someone's been taking stuff from the physics department, making a bomb or something. They're FBI and cops."

"Probably a spy case," a man behind him whispered. "You know, Ru-

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therford's got a big secret contract up in physics. This guy's probably taking stuff to make it look like a thief's at work, not a spy."

"But why search me on the way in?" Joey asked.

Someone else joined the whispered conversation. "This nut takes stuff out and brings it back, like a lending library or something. Always on a Tuesday or Thursday."

"That's just for cover. To throw them off the track."

From behind them, someone else said, "My money's on a terrorist. Making a bomb, a big one; might be in the basement, in a truck, who knows where?"

They continued to talk about terrorists and bombs and spies, and Joey tried to remember just how much stuff he had at home right now that really, legally anyway, belonged in the physics department. He had not lied to his uncle exactly, but he had left out a few things when he told him that he was a familiar face in the department, that he was permitted to use their equipment for his project. One night several years ago, he had wandered in there with a broom in his hand and had been ignored; since then he had visited rather often, always with his broom. Most of the time he saw no one else; sometimes he even swept up a little, and he always looked over what was being discarded. They threw away useful items up there, things he would have had trouble finding anywhere else. And now and then he had to borrow something from the shelves, or the supply room. He had learned very early that if he returned whatever he had taken, put it in some strange place, no uproar resulted. He had assumed that they thought other missing things would turn up again eventually. For three years he had been borrowing, and for three years no one complained. Until now.

After a while they were sent to their classrooms, each group led by its instructor, followed by an agent, or a police officer. They were sorted again — those who had driven to class on one side of the room, others on the opposite side — and then, one by one, the drivers were taken out, presumably to have their cars searched. Joey had come by bus; he and two others were the last ones to be dismissed. As he waited, he could hear Dr. Thornton's voice from out in the hall, talking to one of the cops.

"This is so ridiculous, Officer. You'd do better to concentrate on the regular students here during the day. These people have no interest in any of that equipment."

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"Studying physics, aren't they?"

"Even that, what does it mean? Look, two years ago I had a class about like this one, physics on television. We watched 'Star Trek' reruns, and I talked about the impossible science, the impossible physics basically. This time we're watching 'Superman'! I'm explaining why he couldn't really fly, why the distance between the stars couldn't be traveled, things like that. Is that physics? This class is actually for people who think science is magic, who believe what they see in the movies, on television. Is that science? About a third of my students this term were here for the 'Star Trek' course. If I do the physics in 'The Wizard of Oz,' they'll be back for that. Come on! What could any of them do with an oscilloscope? Or a centrifuge? Or a—"

"Yeah, yeah, Professor. I get your point. Ah, McCloskey, still nothing? I've just got bus riders left here."

The voices moved out of range; in a moment the instructor reentered the classroom and dismissed the remaining students.

Over the next few days, Joey got rid of everything except the disassembler itself. He packed stuff in with the emptied cans of poisons that were headed for the toxic-waste disposal site. He regretted that his project had come to such an abrupt stop, because he had had his eye on one of the laser tubes for a long time. Shiny, black, sleek — that was how his invention should be housed, he knew, but he had to settle for an empty spray tank. He dismantled it and inserted his own filler, and put the whole thing together again. If they came, the cops and agents, anyone, there was nothing for them to find. No one came, however, and he continued his night classes, and gradually the rumors of midnight searches and followers died out, and most people seemed to have forgotten the whole incident. He made a B on his midterm test.

"What's that supposed to mean?" his uncle demanded suspiciously a week or so later. "Have I got any roaches?"

"I mean, ones I could demonstrate with. In the traps, maybe."

Herman glowered at him and turned to the television. Joey knew the roaches in the house had developed such resistance to everything at his uncle's disposal that it seemed they came out to shower whenever he sprayed.

"Come on, Uncle Herman," Joey said. "Maybe I've got an answer for

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Mrs. Saracen, too." They had been back to her apartment twice in the past two weeks; the roaches there were healthier and more numerous than ever.

"Yeah, a shoe with a fat foot on the inside."

"O.K., don't believe me, but take a look in the traps."

Herman had resorted to glass traps with a molasses bait under the sinks, behind cabinets, in closets. Once or twice a week, he took them out to the barbecue and emptied them, doused the bugs with gasoline, and ignited them, scowling all the while. Joey finally talked him into inspecting the traps, all empty of roaches. They had to go out to the garbage cans to find any live ones, and there Joey demonstrated his disassembler, still housed in the spray tank. The roaches vanished with just a flicker — phosphorous hitting the air, Joey said — leaving only a faint scattering of dust behind. Joey scraped it up carefully and deposited it in a test tube he had saved for this purpose. Herman stared in disbelief.

They talked well into the night, and when the talk was done, Joey was a full partner. They would go to Florida, as planned, and make a killing, take on jobs where others had failed, go where no others dared go. Fire ants, carpenter ants, spiders, what the hell.

"Mix up a little water, little alcohol maybe, pine scent. For chrissake, they like to see something come out the nozzle."

Lunamoth accepted Joey's proposal and went to Florida with them. She admitted liking the faint pine fragrance that clung to him, or sometimes lilac, or even cloves. Now and then a cat or dog wandered into the line of fire, and he was very careful about gathering all the dust left behind. In the fall he planned to go back to school. If he had a centrifuge, he thought, he would be able to separate out the elements: pure gold, pure silver, copper, and so on. This disassembler worked on bugs, on small animals and birds, on an alligator, maybe a kid. At least, no one had found him, and he had vanished the same day the exterminators had cleaned up the house. No one ever suspected them, of course, since Mrs. Willowby had not let them out of her sight a moment, and the kid had been playing on the patio, on the other side of glass doors, locked out, in fact, to keep him away from their spray tanks.

Herman took up fishing, and Joey learned to play golf; his Aunt Ethel and Lunamoth joined clubs and did good works. His uncle had been right, Joey sometimes thought; life in Florida was fine. No matter how many

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bugs they got rid of, how many lizards, dogs, cats, birds, alligators, even kids, there were always more, but not so soon as to cause complaints.

He gazed at the array of test tubes and beakers on his shelves — some filled, some partly filled — and he nodded. Life, sacred life, missing only a little gas, a little water. Any biologist worth his salt ought to be able to take the raw ingredients and put them together to make a living organism. Life wasn't that complicated, he was certain, just like controlling the weak forces had proved not to be all that complicated.

Suddenly he was jolted as if by electricity; he felt goose bumps on his arms and felt his hair stand out. The illumination was so sudden, so complete, that he could not move immediately, could hardly even breathe. Like the guy hitching on the road who all at once understood the universe and everything, he realized. Everything he had done so far had been simply preparing him for his real work. He felt holy as he gazed at the raw materials of life lined up on his shelves, and then very briskly he reached for the catalog from the junior college. They had exactly what he needed: Understanding Biology — An Introduction to Life.

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Frog Prince

By Jane Yolen

It is so hard these days
to find a proper prince.
The world is dappled
with pretenders,
as spotty with them
as an adolescent's skin.
I have three daughters;
I have three wedding portions
waiting, waiting
for the marriage offer.
A kingdom
is but a small return
for fifteen years
of tending
these hothouse plants.
Can one read the heart?
Can one judge the mind?
Can one guess the future
from a handshake by a well,
from a dinner conversation,
from a single night in bed?
Yet my first wants to marry
a drummer in a rock band,
my second a man who works with cars.
What next, I ask you?
A grocer's lad?
A stable boy?
An enchanted frog?

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Lisa Tuttle is at her chilling best with this deceptively quiet tale about a man who plans for the end of the world but ignores an appalling threat in his own back yard.

The Colonization of Edward Beal

By Lisa Tuttle

EDWIN BEAL WAS looking forward to the end of the world.

Not just *any* end of the world, however. He had no use for the idea of nuclear war: that ending was too final by half. He didn't want all life wiped out, just most of humanity. It wasn't the destruction of the physical world that he craved, but the end of civilization as he knew it.

Driving home from work each day, Edwin customarily passed a boundary sign that declared the London Borough of Brent a Nuclear-Free Zone. It made him sneer, when it didn't make him sad. It was so pathetic, individuals imagining they could opt out of humanity's collective madness if the worst came to pass. He thought of the county councillors, and all the inhabitants of Brent, sleeping soundly in their beds, imagining that now the target would be painted somewhere else, imagining they would survive intact while London burned around them.

Sometimes, as he labored in the mills of the large American computer

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firm that paid him so well for designing software, Edwin toyed with a nuclear scenario, imagining some terrorist organization bombing new York or Washington. It would have to be an indigenous American group, however, or what was left of the American military-industrial complex would take vengeance on the evil foreigners, and American vengeance would lead, inevitably, to global war. London would go if there ever were such a war; and with it, all of Britain. Edwin did not imagine that even he could survive a nuclear holocaust. And survival, for Edwin, was what it was all about.

Financial catastrophe would be better; collapse of the stock market, of the worldwide monetary system. Everyone would head for the hills then, but Edwin would have a head start.

At least, he hoped he would. Crawling home through the miserable London traffic on Friday afternoon (somehow it never mattered how early he left on Friday: it was as if everyone else had the same idea at the same time, and the rush hour started then), Edwin thought impatiently ahead to the narrow, rather decrepit house in Haringay that he called home, and visualized letters lying on the mat. Letters with airmail stickers and stamps from Australia or America. Some positive response to all the job applications and inquiries he had dispatched *must* be forthcoming.

He had imagined it would be easy. After all, he had a skill, and he wasn't picky about *where* in North America (Australia was second choice) or with what company he got a job. But if there were jobs in America, they were not for him. No one was willing to import him, and Edwin was beginning to feel that time was running out. He was having dreams, telling him the end was near. He was terrified of leaving Britain too late. He had to escape, had to get off this tiny, crumbling island to survive. He had to save himself.

When he was younger, Edwin had imagined running away to Scotland or Wales and surviving there after the collapse of civilization. He had devoured science fiction stories about new ice ages; or the death of grass; of plagues, wars, and alien invasions, and had determined that when things began breaking down, from whatever cause, he would be on the road to the north, pack on his back, ready for a new life in the wilderness.

But now that he had acquired the survival skills he had once only imagined, and had spent several rough Highland holidays, Edwin no longer found Scotland satisfactory. It was too close, too small, like all of

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Britain. Once the cities started to go, people would head for the country, and there were bound to be too many who would have the same idea as Edwin.

No, he wanted the space and emptiness of a whole new continent to fill himself. He wanted to be a new pioneer. A whole new planet would be even better, but although he still read science fiction, Edwin had not, since his teens, seriously believed that this was a possibility open to him. Even if, say, a faster-than-light drive were invented, the resultant space program would be too late for him — he would be too old, and probably of the wrong nationality, to be picked as a participant. He would have to make his own opportunity, on this earth.

There was a parking space directly in front of his house. This was so rare that Edwin took it as a sign; and, indeed, when he opened the door, he found three airmail letters. But all of them, when opened, provided only disappointment. They were formal notes thanking him for his interest and expressing the ritual regret that there were no openings for him. Edwin went on standing in the dark, rather damp little entrance hall. He could hear voices, not in English, from next door. He didn't even want to go upstairs and log these replies and check on how many more chances he still had.

But there were other ways to get what he wanted, Edwin told himself. He had a fair bit of money saved up, and he could sell his house and go to Canada as a tourist, to vanish into the north woods when his visa expired.

It was possible, too, he thought, that in America the collapse of civilization was not so imminent as it was here. Perhaps it was only Britain that was collapsing; and if he went to America, he would miss it all.

These thoughts cheered him, and Edwin set aside his mail and went down to the cellar to change into his gardening gear, planning to get in a couple of hours of work before dinner.

Outside, the routine labor of digging in and breaking up the soil left his mind free, and his thoughts slipped all too easily into a well-worn fantasy.

The smashing of windows and bottle glass, a strong smell of petro, and licking flames. Hoarse, violent voices shouting, not in English. He'd left his escape late, but he had everything he needed in his rucksack, always ready at a moment's notice. He didn't think he would have to fight his way out of the city, but he wouldn't have minded. Nobody paid any notice to

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one large, strongly built, white man walking purposefully through the mad confusion of the streets; they were all too busy with their looting and raping.

A woman's scream: it was Jennifer-from-the-office. She was surrounded by dark-skinned youths pulling at her clothes. He glimpsed a breast, and her pale, terrified face; heard their coarse laughter.

He needed no weapons but his fists.

Well, maybe a broomstick would be better, snatched up, deadly in his hands as—

But there were four of them, maybe five.

The gun slipped easily into his hands; without even the memory of having drawn it, it fit there as if—

Not a handgun, but something bigger. He wore it slung across his back. He wouldn't even have to shoot them, because the mere sight of it—

Edwin thought of the ads in *Soldier of Fortune* magazine, and longed with a hopeless passion for America. It was so easy there to have a gun — everything would be easier in America, including, no doubt, the women.

Jennifer's pale face, adoring and grateful as she clung to him, panting.

Jennifer, tearing off her blouse (the lacy white one) to bind his wound. It was only minor, but — one of her attackers had cut him with a knife, and Edwin had been forced to shoot. He wanted to explain to her that he wasn't violent, he didn't like to kill, but he'd been forced, he'd had no choice — but she stopped him talking with her delicious mouth.

In his excitement, Edwin stabbed the fork more deeply into the earth than was necessary, and then jarred back on his heels as he struck something hard.

Frowning, he stabbed again, exploratively. It seemed much larger than any rock left in this garden — after all the years he had worked it —should be: the size of a football, at least. He could have left it, but curiosity drove him now. He wanted to bring it up and see it, so he threw the fork aside and began to dig with the shovel. The light was nearly gone by the time he brought the thing out, but even in full daylight, Edwin wouldn't have known what he held.

It was not a rock. Beneath the clinging dirt, the surface of the thing was hard and shiny, rather like plastic, and a mottled brown and yellow color. It was about the size of a soccer ball, nearly as round, but heavier. Edwin frowned at it, tapped it with a fingernail, and listened to the not-quite-

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hollow click. He tried to clean the dirt off as he speculated on its intended use. Was it a children's toy, or some bit of decoration? How had it come to be buried in his garden? It was seamless, he thought at first, the surface flawless beneath the soil. Then his searching found a slight concavity, a small depression in the hard, slick surface of the globe. He pressed it with a fingertip, fancying that it gave slightly to his touch, and then, with shocking suddenness, it opened. His finger slipped inside, quite without his intending it, and as he jerked his hand back, he let the thing fall to the ground.

Edwin stood a moment, breathing hard, trying to understand.

It was nearly dark. He decided to take the thing inside, to get a better look at it. He pushed at it with his foot, making it roll, trying to see the opening, but there was no sign of it. He was nervous about picking it up, fearful that it would open again for his fingers, but he managed to conquer his fear and carry it into the kitchen without mishap.

There he cleaned it carefully with a damp sponge and found no cracks, no indentations, no flaws whatsoever in the smooth, now shining, surface. He raised it closer to his face, squinting slightly, and suddenly he thought he saw it, a darker spot against the mottled brown.

It opened like a mouth, and *something* shot out: something like a worm or a snake or a turtle head extended itself from the opening and bit his nose.

Edwin screamed, and was ashamed of the noise as soon as he heard it.

Having struck, the thing retreated. Edwin was holding a hard plastic ball without any apparent holes, flaws, or openings. It might have been a dream except for the throbbing of his nose. Carefully, he set the ball down on the draining board and went upstairs to the bathroom. He was shaking. Although his nose hardly hurt at all, he could see in the bathroom mirror that it was very red, and swelling rapidly. He stared for some time at his own reflection and prodded his nose, but no understanding came to him.

He went back downstairs and stared at the thing from a safe distance. What could it be? Some sort of tortoise? He'd never heard of anything like it, and he'd always been a fan of television nature programs. He was certain it didn't belong in England, but even as some more exotic creature, it seemed unlikely. Perhaps it belonged in the sea? It couldn't be some grossly outsized insect . . . perhaps a carnivorous plant? He would have to find out. On Monday he would start phoning around. For a moment he

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was almost sorry it was a weekend, since that meant he'd have the thing around, a mystery, for two days. If he could have brought himself to touch it, Edwin would have put it back in the garden. But he decided discretion was the better part, and left it on the draining board. He was careful to close the kitchen door, shutting it safely in, before he went up to bed that night.

By then the lump on his nose had grown quite alarmingly large, but it still did not hurt. Edwin decided he would visit the doctor in the morning: it wouldn't do to be too casual about an animal bite, particularly when it might not even be an animal that had bitten him.

Perhaps there was some infection, he thought as he settled rather shakily between the sheets. He certainly felt feverish, and sank at once into strange dreams.

Jennifer-from-the-office was biting his nose. He slipped his hand beneath her sweater, only to find her lovely large, soft breasts encased in a hard shell. He pressed and pressed at them in frustration, and finally they yielded to him; they opened like mouths and bit his hands. Jennifer was biting him all over, and he was in an ecstasy of painful lust. Tormented beyond endurance by her teasing, he grabbed her head and forced it to his groin. But even as he moaned in happy anticipation, feeling her mouth on him, Edwin was aware that something was very wrong. Jennifer's head had no hair on it. Jennifer's head was hard and shell-like. And Jennifer's mouth, nibbling at his cock, was quite the wrong size.

It wasn't Jennifer and it wasn't a dream. Somehow, in his sleep, he had come downstairs. He was awake now, lying naked on the cold kitchen floor, clutching with both hands the thing he'd dug up in the garden , letting it bite him.

Edwin managed to sit up and hurl the thing away from him. But he knew, with a horrible sick feeling, that it was much too late. The damage, whatever it was, had been well and truly done.

He was covered in red lumps, the smallest no worse than mosquito bites, largest almost the size of golf balls. There were two of those on his hairy chest, a bizarre parody of a women's breasts. Swallowing his sickness, Edwin forced himself to touch one of the swellings. It was hard, almost as if it *were* a golf ball beneath the skin; but despite his squeamishness, it wasn't painful. He could see the one on his nose without the aid of a mirror, and he knew he must look like a clown with a big red ball for a nose.

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"Well, at least it doesn't hurt," he said, touching the end of his nose with a fingertip.

And then the lump burst beneath his finger, and then it *did* hurt.

Something came out of the lump when it burst, but Edwin couldn't see what it was for the involuntary tears of pain that filled his eyes. When he could see again, he saw a creature like a tiny terrapin, head and four rudimentary limbs protruding from a mottled brown shell. There were differences, but it was recognizably the same sort of creature as the thing he had dug up in his garden. Blood or some other liquid dripped down his face. Shakily, Edwin made his way to the kitchen sink to clean himself. But while he was doing so, one of the lumps on his chest burst.

His knee buckled with the pain, and as he went down, he banged his head on the sink: almost, but unfortunately not quite, hard enough to knock himself out.

Lying on the floor in a daze of pain and dread, Edwin set himself counting the lumps on his body. They were increasing in size — he didn't need to touch them to know that — and it was obvious that when they reached some critical circumference, they burst, and the creature inside was born.

He counted twelve, when one of the two on his left hand exploded, making further counting — or any sort of coherent thought — temporarily impossible. But when he had recovered, Edwin continued his grim self-exploration with as much determination as if, by knowing the worst, he could somehow change things.

There were twenty left. They were bursting at five- or six-minute intervals. Edwin decided there was no point in even trying to phone for help. A doctor — presuming he could get one to come out — could give him some painkillers perhaps, but wouldn't be able to change what was happening. The only thing for it, Edwin thought, was to endure. He kept careful count of each emerging terrapin, for he wanted to know when it was finally over. The next two hours were the longest and most terrible in his life.

But when it was, finally, over, despite his sickening exhaustion and physical misery, Edwin felt a kind of triumph. Not merely because it was over and he had survived, but also because it had occurred to him that *this* — this creature he had dug up in his garden, these creatures that had come out of his body — was the end of the world as he had known it. These

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creatures were invaders from another planet, and they were going to bring about the downfall of civilization.

He looked at them, his twenty-three alien creatures crawling about on he linoleum, snapping at each other with razor-sharp teeth, and he almost smiled.

Painfully, Edwin hauled himself to his feet and went and opened the back door. Then he fetched the original shell, and bowled it out into the garden. One of the babies noticed, and scurried outside.

"Curious?" said Edwin. He held the door open and watched as two more creatures ventured out into the wide world. "Go on," said Edwin. "Plenty of room for everyone . . . a whole new world to conquer. Go on outside."

Three more made their way across the threshold into the garden, their mode of progress a curious cross between a slide and a waddle. Edwin waited, speaking encouragingly, but at least half of them paid no attention, showing no interest in leaving the kitchen, and eventually he grew impatient. He fetched the broom and swept them out, sneering at them when they snapped ineffectually up at him.

"Go now, while it's still dark," he said. "London is sleeping. It's yours! This is your only chance. Once they wake up, they'll kill you. You're easy enough to crush when you're so small. I could smash the lot of you now, with this broom, but I won't. I'm a collaborator. Didn't expect that, did you? Didn't know you'd find somebody willing to help you colonize this planet. Now, hurry up. Go on, before I change my mind. Go find somebody else to bite."

When they were all outside, he locked the door, from habit, and stumbled upstairs. He paused in the bathroom to clean himself up. One glimpse of himself in the mirror told him more than he wanted to know. He looked like an ambulatory corpse, covered with raw, festering wounds. He couldn't bear the thought of taking a bath, so he cleaned himself gingerly with a flannel. He had mostly stopped bleeding, but his wounds were seeping some other, colorless fluid. He hoped it was a healthy reaction — for even if it was something he should try to stop, he didn't have the faintest idea how; and besides, he was nearly asleep on his feet.

Edwin Beal fell into sleep almost as he fell into bed, and he slept like the dead. Some hours later, some way into the morning, the sound of breaking glass woke him.

He opened his eyes but lay still, too tired and groggy even to try to

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move. Glass . . . a window . . . the sound had come from downstairs. Someone had broken a window, broken in. He told himself to get up and prepare to repel the intruder, but his body did not respond.

Edwin blinked in frustration, and came more fully awake. Conscious now, he tried to move his arm, and could not. Nor could he move either leg. Yet he could feel the muscles flexing and straining — he wasn't incapable or paralyzed, but he was *bound* in some way.

With tremendous effort, Edwin managed to raise his head, and he saw the fine, strong cords that bound him to the bed. Not cords at all, really, but something that looked like dried mucus. It was the stuff that had seeped out of his wounds. One strand of it, from his nose, looped across his cheek and ear, tugging his head back to the bed, so that it was only by straining to the utmost that he managed to achieve a rather lopsided view of his trussed body. His neck muscles ached. With a groan, Edwin let his head fall back onto the pillow.

He could hear them on the stairs: a clumping, slithering sound as they knocked together and some of them fell back. Stairs must be difficult for them; they were probably annoyed that he hadn't stayed put. Why should they bother to seek new worlds until they had used up the old one? Edwin wondered how much they ate, and how quickly. He wondered how long he would survive.

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FILMS

HARLAN ELLISON'S WATCHING

INSTALLMENT 26: *In Which a Good Time Was Had By All and an Irrelevant Name-Dropping of Fritz Leiber Occurs for No Better Reason than to Remind Him How Much We Love and Admire Him*

Though her name be not Calliope, Euterpe, Thalia or any of the other six, a Muse of my East Coast acquaintance also happens to be on a first-name basis with John Updike, and she happened to mention a month or two ago that Updike had said the new Warner Bros. film adaptation of his 1984 fantasy THE WITCHES OF EASTWICK only superficially resembled the novel, but it sure as hell captured the feeling of the book.

Now, this was not Updike's first picnic in the enchanted forest of our mythic genre. Back in 1963, he did a sorta kinda symbolic fantasy called THE CENTAUR. It is my least favorite of all the fifteen or sixteen Updike books I've read. No, let me be more specific: surgeons have it easier; they are blessed and cursed with the ability to bury their mistakes; novelists have to live with the walking dead of their failed efforts. THE CENTAUR made my hide itch. I ground away valuable layers of tooth enamel during the reading.

So it was with considerable pleasure that I found Updike's second sojourn down our way considerably more successful. (Like all of us who have access to the range and spiced variety of fantasy literature that includes writers *The New York Review of Books* has never even heard of, I often find myself subscribing to the Accepted Wisdom that visitors from The Mainstream more often than not make asses of themselves when they decide to try their hand at what we do. I am ashamed when I catch myself thinking that way; and for every Doris Lessing, Herman Wouk, Jacqueline Susann, Taylor Caldwell

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or Andrew Greeley who makes us rend our flesh and spit up our breakfast, there is an appositely wonderful Peter Straub, Naomi Mitchison, John Hersey, Peter Carey or Russell Hoban who teaches us old dogs some new tricks. So it is surely unfair of me, of us, to go to our graves bearing that ignoble misconception. So I was *happy* that Updike pulled it off, rather than wallowing in smug pleasure at his earlier misstep.)

While it is impossible to read *any* novel in which suburban witches appear in a contemporary setting without taking out the prayer rug and intoning the hallowed names of Fritz Leiber and CONJURE WIFE, Updike's literary conceit is a good read, an honest reexamination of the basic fantasy construct, and is filled with some of his liveliest writing.

What would be made of the book by the Tony and Pulizer Prize-winning playwright Michael Cristofer, the brilliant *Mad Max* director George Miller, and the "hot" but frequently tasteless producers Peter Guber and Jon Peters (we're talking here *Flashdance, A Star is Born, The Deep* and *The Color Purple*, among others), was anybody's guess. But the odds weren't terribly terrific. Updike ain't that easy to translate onto celluloid, and the stats of previous attempts look like readouts on the value of the Mexican *peso*.

But I am here to tell you that *The Witches of Eastwick* is great fun. Get it out of your head that it's Updike's book, scene for scene, or line for line, or even character for character. But no matter how you saw Darryl Van Horne (they've dropped one of the "r"s from his first name in the film), Alexandra, Jane and Sukie in the novel, you would have to possess the soul of a pigeon-kicker to object to the interpretations of those characters by Jack Nicholson, Cher, Susan Sarandon and Michele Pfeiffer. Veronica Cartwright and Richard Jenkins are also not too dusty as Felicia and Clyde Alden.

Updike's Eastwick, Rhode Island (found and filmed in Cohasset, Massachusetts) is the safe, settled Late George Apleyesque cubbyhole of life in which Alex, Jane and Sukie mark off the days of their lives as victims of "the dreaded three D's": death, desertion and divorce. Alex's husband is dead, Jane's husband has divorced, and Sukie's old man has deserted, leaving her with six daughters.

The women possess "the source," the secret power of witchcraft that *all* men — naively or cynically — believe lies in the female. (Van Horne delivers a brief but impassioned codification of this cliche near

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the beginning of the film and, near the end, does it again with the kid gloves off, inquiring whether God has made women as a mistake or as some sort of ghastly punishment for men. I take no side in this matter. I merely report what is on the screen.) This power manifests itself fully only with the arrival in Eastwick — perhaps by wish-fulfillment of the women's group fantasy — of a "prince traveling under a dark curse . . . very handsome . . . with a cock neither too large nor too small, but right in the middle": Daryl (one "r") Van Horne.

Well, Jack Nicholson may be many things, but "handsome" ain't one of them. There is too much pasta in that face. Yet in a few minutes, like the exquisite three women, we are conned into accepting Nicholson and Van Horne as just such a "dark prince." And he proceeds, without too much butter, to seduce all three of them. To tell you more would steal from you that which you deserve: the pleasure of getting coshed over the noggin by a satanically charming romp courtesy of all concerned.

And even if Fritz Leiber did most of this to perfection in 1943, preceded only by René Clair, Fredric March, Veronica Lake, Cecil Kellaway and Robert Benchley (from the screenplay by Robert Pirosh and Marc Connelly) in 1942's *I Married A Witch*, you would have to be the kind of person who enjoys pissing on the snowy egret to carp about this delicious film.

As Stan Lee would put it, 'nuff said!

But:

Unceasing in my efforts to broaden your filmgoing experience (and by the way of thanking all of you for saving Woody Allen's life by retroactively awarding him a Hugo for *Sleeper* in 1974, which fannish largesse was imparted to him on the operating table, thereby giving him the will to live), I have preserved my notes from the Warner Bros. screening, and I offer them here in brief, to give you things to watch for.

• The Writers Guild fought long and hard for proper credit onscreen for the scenarist(s). But notice, when you go to see *The Witches of Eastwick*, how cunningly the Directors Guild has circumvented the rules. All but two of the opening credits are committed, concluding with the writer, before there is an intrusion of a complete scene. Then, after that space, we return to more bucolic camerawork (by the inspired Vilmos Zsigmond, who could make rice pudding as breathtaking as Walden Pond) and in the artistic respite that follows, the downtime, as it were, they flash the producers' and director's credits. It isn't *exactly*

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a degrading-to-writers cheat, but in terms of cinematic vocabulary, of what the eye sees and registers, it is a now-commonplace dodge that establishes who is below the salt and who ain't. Watch for it. Notice it.

• The editing by Richard Francis-Bruce is marvelous. Very suspenseful. Particularly in the ways in which it is integrated with what may be the best film score by John Williams in a decade. The aural package melded to the visual freight, is as good as anything you'll currently find on the big screen. It *looks* like a movie, not just another of those slambang tv eye-rippers tossed into the microwave and toughened up for theater release.

• Note the intelligence of everyone in the film. People may act weirdly, but consistently. There are no dopes in this story. Which is a tribute to Cristofer and the canny players, because Updike gave us a fantasy trope, and the scenarist and actors have rendered it mimetically, sequentially, logically.

• Catch the flies. Every time Nicholson comes onscreen, we get a not-obtrusive LORD OF THE FLIES echo. More would have been to pull a Spielberg ("Hey, looka me! See how well I know my subtext! See how cute I am!") and less would have been lost in the rush of the story.

• Consider if it isn't time to send a letter to your regional movie *maven*, to suggest we may indeed have had enough vomiting scenes in films. *The Exorcist* did it as well as any of us cared to have it done, and if *quality* of puke were not sufficient, Terry Gilliam gave us Mr. Creosote in *Monty Python's The Meaning of Life* for sheer *quantity*. Beyond those seminal upchuck icons, all else is, well, simply parking the tiger. Calico carpet comment. What I mean, mate, you seen one spring-loaded tsunami of york, you've seen it all, in't it?

• The tennis scene. See and delight. Then catch the resonance from the ultimate sequence in Antonioni's *Blowup* (1966). Upper crust athletic activity as mystical ritual.

• If costume designer Aggie Guerard Rodgers doesn't get an Oscar for Jack Nicholson's wardrobe (provided by Cerruti 1881 Paris), then we ought to call in Lt. Col. Oliver North to start collecting funds for the overthrow of Hollywood's Academy.

• Rob Bottin's special makeup effects. Are you, as am I, getting weary of that same Bottin monster look? Would you kindly pay some attention to it in this film and ask your kids or the nearest SFX freak if it doesn't look boringly as if Bottin uses the same damned slavering, hunching critter every time, with a

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bit more or a bit less hair? Tell his mother. Bottin's, not the critter's.

In conclusion: I'm not sure John Updike would like one of his serious novels thought of as simply great fun, but that's the way this film has turned out. And unless I'm off my feed, I think you'll look at this drollery and recognize it as a germinal piece of American cinema. One of those films people will use as reference for years to come. A very *American* movie, beautifully directed by an Australian, coproduced by a talented ex-hairdresser (we'll never let you get above your station, Jon), persuasively acted by three of the most seductive women in film today, and written with brio by a man who should be kept working at his craft by whips, if necessary.

Even Fritz Leiber will enjoy this one.

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A short and surprising tale about a trip to the doctor, from a master of short and surprising tales, and sometimes of longer ones, too, such as his most recent novel, VERGIL IN AVERNO.

Mountaineers Are Always Free

By Avram Davidson

OLD RAYNAL SMITH had been mechanic of the No. Two Tipple for over twenty years and had seen his eldest son die from catching one on his back when the ceiling fell in Tunnel Six off the Andy Johnson Shaft, and his second son blown up when they let the dynamite set too long at Level Two, Wilson Shaft; the third one, time the cage just *dropped*, Black Tuesday, had a thighbone drave through his right eye socket. So they say. But you couldn't hardly tell from the way he was holding his youngest son's right shoulder. "He says it were a baby one," said Old Ray.

Young Doctor watched hydrogen peroxide bubbling in Little Ray's leg and grunted, "Whyne the hell don't you boys keep *away* from—"

"Well, he don't know, rightly, whure he *was*," the old man apologized. "We hain't buried none back thur sence *I* was a baw, them wooden markers is all fell down, and *ain't* hardly none o' them old Free Will Babtiss People still *'live*, hardly, an' they too *ol* ta take ceer o' the place!"

"Place ought to be *marked*!"

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The boy, noting the rise in the doctor's voice, began to howl right dolefully. His father kneaded the shoulder more intensely as the doctor sloshed hot water and liquid green soap. "Well, now, Baw, hit was only a young 'un, way you tell, reckon hit dent like bitin' you any moren you liked bein' *bet*!"

"Why'd 'ee do it, then?" demanded the boy, speaking words for the first time.

"They'd never *believe* this back at the university if I were to tell them, which I sure as hell won't!" Young Doc tugged at the hard-pulled home-made leather bootlaces, and the boy howled some more.

Old Ray was mighty patient. "Cuz hit were only a *young* 'un, Baw, hit were sceered, jist as *you* was—" He stopped, and his face and neck moved convulsively as Young Doctor reached for the scalpel. "Oh, sir, *cain't* you *save* it, *please*? We air pore folks, but—"

The doctor slashed the laces and pulled the boot off the dirty, smeary leg and foot, then dropped the scalpel in the basin and picked up a clean sponge with a hemostat and swabbed at the mingled blood and dirt and cedar-smelling green soap and peroxide; all the while he went on speaking, "'Save it'? — why, that's up to you, but it doesn't look to me that it'd stand *up* to another cobbling."

Old Raynal's face and hand went slack. His mouth hung. Then he said, "You mean . . . the *boot*?"

"Sure the boot, what the hell you think I mean?" Slosh, scrub; the boy howled. "They'd never be*lieve* — *look* at . . . look at those *teeth* marks, oh my—"

"Whut'd I *thenk* you? — I thought you meant the *foot*! The *laig*!"

At mention of foot and leg, the boy screamed and jerked and struggled to rise; his daddy, though it was not very convenient for him to do so, fetched him a good punch the side of the head: blood spurted. Little Ray subsided, nose bleeding. He moaned a bit.

Young Doctor had been there a year, so he was not terribly shocked, but he was new enough to be angry. "What the hell'd you *hit* 'em for, Smith?"

The day was full of bad surprises for Old Ray, and still they came on: half a day's pay as good as lost; only living boy-child bit by a Parson John, if only a baby one; he, the boy's daddy, just now feeling worse than if a daughter had been caught whoring (boy a *cripple*? *bet*ter dead), and now *this*—

"— clean it out real good, give him a tetanus shot against lockjaw, lucky

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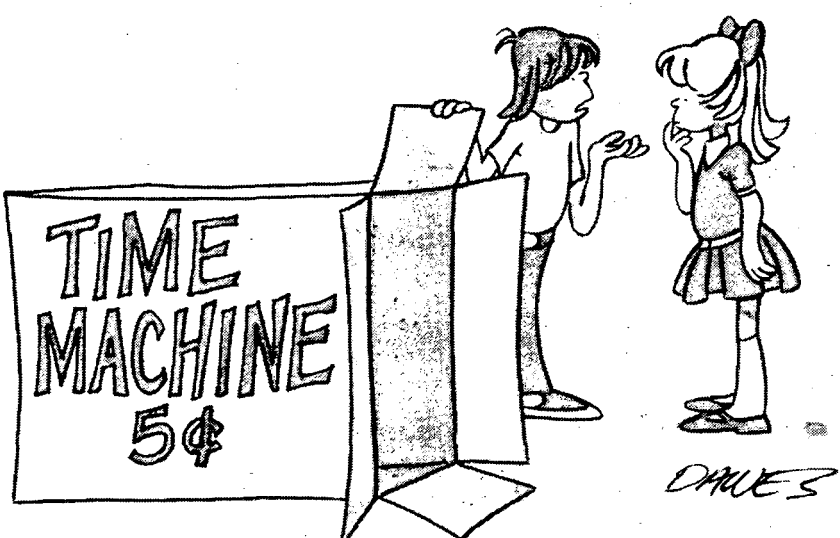
no reports the Parson John carries rabies — say, Sonny, instead of just crying, why don't you *tell* me *what*—"

Young Doc's eyes did not see that Smith's face had already gone red and mean. He jerked his boy up so that the wet leg slid out of the doctor's hands, then slammed him down again. "You don't tell 'eem *nothin'*, Baw! You hear me? As for *you*, why I reckon the company pays your wages same as mine, I hit 'em ta make 'em *mind*, is why! We ain't *clean* enough for ya? You city people thenk you own the yarth, but you don't own the folks in Cobb Cove, hyurr, and you don't own Raynal Smith!" He struck his son again. "Git that boot awn, you *hurr* muh?" The boot was scarcely on when he left at the double, dragging the boy. Boy didn't utter sound. The young doctor knew that the boy might get poulticed with cobwebs and cow shit and might recover and might not, and that nobody would b*elieve* it at the university that the boy had been bitten by a young ghoul, were he to tell it. And that he would not.



"Of course it's a time machine. Get in now and when you get out five minutes from now it'll be the future . . . right!"

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Edward Bryant ("The Man of the Future," October 1984) offers a new story about a rock 'n roll group called Scorched Earth and a stranger — far from home — who fills in as drummer

Drummer's Star

By Edward Bryant

IT LOOKED LIKE curtains for Scorched Earth after Bobby T. got hit in the mouth with an empty Lone Star bottle right during the encore of the second set. The boys called it an encore, even though none of the rednecks guzzling down the suds and harder stuff really wanted to listen. But the guys had some pride. Encore it was — first a weird up-tempo medley of "Sally Go Round the Roses" and "96 Tears," then the absolute drag-down of "Wisconsin Death Trip." I always tell them to reverse the order. They never listen.

"Death Trip" is a terrific song, one of Scorched Earth's really good originals, but the gut-level dirge of the bass and Kenny Bach's nasal whine of a vocal line didn't get a whole lot of acceptance from the tipsy crowd. What it got was our drummer in the hospital with glass cuts, a jaw busted in two places, and seven missing teeth. Son of a bitch with the bottle should pitch for the Mets.

The clientele of the Dillo Patch couldn't have cared less after the

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music ground to a halt. They were too busy whaling on each other with fists, pool cues, and more bottles. Looked like the scenes in Westerns where they bust up the saloon, except here, guys tended to stay down when they were slugged, and the blood looked a lot messier.

Cotter and Peach were helping Bobby T. out from behind his kit and down off the shaky riser that served as a bandstand, when Kenny numbly dragged up to me holding his Stratocaster by the neck and said, "Rusty, man, get us the hell *out* of here. I think Bobby's really *hurt*."

Well, Bobby was, of course. A couple of guys from the club who didn't look like they wanted to wade into the fighting on the dance floor helped hustle him out of the Dillo Patch and across town to the hospital and the only ER. The intern on duty did his best to patch Bobby up, gave him a big shot of painkiller, and said Bobby T.'d have to stay at least overnight to be observed for possible concussion.

So that was that. The drummer in the hospital and another day of contract left. Contracts don't grow on trees, especially not in sleazoid clubs in tiny towns out in the less-traveled boonies of west Texas.

Bobby drifted off with his mouth all wrapped in bloody gauze. It looked like he'd have the comfortable bed for the night. I took the boys back to the Motel 6 and put them all to bed. Me, I couldn't sleep, and so I took a walk.

It was late enough that the single traffic light in the center of town was switched off its cycle and just blinked red in two directions, amber in the other two. The pickup drivers didn't seem to pay much mind. The bars were letting out, and I suspected the local cops were cooping it until the noise died down.

Walking at a right angle to the main drag, it didn't take me long to get to the edge of town. It wasn't like being on any of the coasts — East, West, or even the Gulf. I just had to cross a final haphazardly graveled street, get to the other side of a narrow field, and then there I was, climbing a low sand hill and looking back at the sparse lights of town.

One thing about being in the middle of nowhere — at least there wasn't a lot of crap in the air to spoil the night. I looked up and saw the Milky Way banding the sky. Looked kind of like a belt of air pollution, only prettier. I sat down on the rock and watched the stars twinkle for a while. I counted three falling stars in about as many minutes. Not a bad haul. I've always loved the sky at night, even when I've been in the middle

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of cities. There's a challenge in trying to find stars through the dome of light and the cloud layers.

"It is very beautiful," said a voice from right behind my left shoulder.

I jumped. "Who the hell are you?"

"I was at the Dillo Patch when the trouble started. I enjoyed the music very much."

I cocked my head and tried to focus on the guy. All I could make out in the darkness was just his outline. He could have been anybody.

"Hell of a finish," I said.

"Is your drummer badly injured?"

"Nothing to shout about," I said. "I expect he'll get out tomorrow, or maybe the next day. But he's not going to be hitting the skins very soon. Fingers are fine, but I think his head'll beat to a rhythm of its own for a while."

"That's too bad."

"Sure as shit is," I said. Me sitting, him standing, we both stayed quiet for a while.

Finally he said, "Maybe I could help you out."

"Yeah?"

"You have to play again soon, right?"

"Tomorrow night."

"At home, I have played the drums," said the man.

"Rock 'n' roll?"

"Something very like that."

"May not be close enough," I said. "You were there. You heard them. We're talkin' hot."

"Try me," he said.

"O.K., you show up tomorrow at the bar. Give me the morning to sleep in and check on Bobby T. Come around about two?"

"I will be there."

"You're sure you can play?" My words just sort of spilled out into the night and lay there.

There was nobody else on the hilltop but me.

ROAD-MANAGING Scorched Earth is just a little something I'm doing to kill time until a major project starts up. Sure, that's what I tell myself. The truth is, the guys are about the only gig I can land right now. I've been pretty good about preserving what's left of

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the inside of my nose; I mean, I've been clean for better than two years, but it doesn't seem to mean spit to the groups I used to work with. Not bitter, not me. No sir.

Except on Saturdays, and this was Saturday. Two o'clock. I sat there in the mostly empty Dillo, sucking on a glass of club soda I'd had the barkeep put about half an entire lime into to give the stuff some taste. It didn't help much.

Even though I wasn't drinking, I was getting philosophical. About the only thing that keeps me going is the music. I do love the music.

Kenny, Cotter, and Peach were on the low stage, tuning up. Cotter and Kenny shook their shaggy heads to a quick riff on Cotter's Fender bass. Peach's lank mohawk sort of slumped over to the side. None of us felt in terrific shape. Nobody sat behind Bobby T.'s traps. Not yet. I'd seen Bobby before lunch. He was still mostly out of it, drifting along on the painkillers. Tomorrow, whatever happened tonight, I'd stuff him in the car with the rest, and we'd head out to points hideously beyond Midland and Odessa. But there still was tonight.

"You are the manager?"

I looked up. "Rusty McClanahan," I said.

"I spoke to you last night."

He was tall, thin, dressed in nondescript work clothes that could have come off the sale rack at J.C. Penney's. I noticed his hands and fingers. He didn't have the ground-in black telltales of an oil patch roughneck, but he did have rough skin and calluses on his fingers. Obviously he'd done some real work in his life. His eyes were close-set and dark; hair close-cropped and the same color as the eyes. Black, like it was ground in.

"Still say you can drum?"

He nodded.

The other guys had seen the man come in. I'd already warned them over a black-coffee breakfast. Naturally they were skeptical. Kenny and Cotter put their guitars down on the wire stands; Peach stepped out from behind his Yamaha keyboard. They came over and stared at the stranger. He didn't seem to be too worried — just looked back at them. I introduced the three of them to the stranger. He nodded at each name.

"So you got a name?" said Kenny to the stranger.

He seemed to hesitate. "You can call me Ringo," he said.

"Give me a fuckin' break," said Peach, not exactly under his breath.

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"Ringo?" said Cotter.

"It's not really my name," said the stranger. "It is the name of someone I've always admired."

"The outlaw or the Beatle?" said Kenny.

"Why, the musician, of course," came the imperturbable answer.

"What a crock," said Peach. I knew my keyboardist was not in a good mood today.

"O.K.," I said to the stranger. "I've already talked to the guys. We've got two sets to play here tonight. We're ready to see what you can do. Do good enough, and you're on for the night. That's all I can promise."

"That's fine," said the stranger. "I'll be leaving after the performance. The timing should be adequate."

The members of Scorched Earth exchanged glances.

"Let's do it," said Peach.

"—boogie," said Cotter.

"—rock 'n' roll," said Kenny ironically.

The stranger got up on the stage with them. I couldn't quite bring myself to call him Ringo yet. He gingerly settled himself on Bobby T.'s seat, adjusting it a little lower. He picked up the sticks and tentatively rapped the snares, tickled the cymbals. He thumped the bass. So far, so good.

"You want anything in particular?" said Kenny.

"Whatever," said the stranger. "I can follow."

He did.

It was a terrific set. Too bad nobody was around except me and the barkeep. After a while he even stopped polishing glasses.

The guys tried a little of everything: "Peggy Sue," "Inna Gadda Da Vida," "Purple Haze," "Travelin' Band," even — for God's sakes — "Wipe Out." The stranger kept up. More than kept up. I've heard good. He was better.

I've heard guys like Krupa and Buddy Rich. I've seen them in live performances that outclass their albums by 200 percent. I've seen the rock drummers — hell, I've even worked with some of them. Back when. . . . John Bonham and Earl Palmer, Ginger Baker and Stewart Copeland. Even the other Ringo. Starr, that is.

I've always thought Starkey was underrated.

This guy was technically as good. He was fabulous. But there was something wrong that I couldn't quite put a finger on. The music was

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terrific for a band using a new drummer. But there was still something slightly odd. What the hell was it?

I finally decided maybe it was that the stranger was in a different —and stranger — league than the rest of the band. Nothing fatal, no mistakes, nothing like that.

And what the hell, we had a contract to fill out.

"O.K., O.K.," I finally said, standing up and waving them all to quiet down at the end of "Louie, Louie." "You got a drummer for tonight," I said to the guys. "You got a gig," I said to the stranger. He looked like he wanted to smile, but he didn't.

"I don't know, Rusty," said Peach. "It's not quite comin' together—"

"For tonight," I said, "it's close enough for rock 'n' roll."

"Thank you," said the stranger.

I'd asked the manager of the Dillo Patch for some two-by-fours and chicken wire to screen off the stage; or, if not that, at least a big bouncer. He promised — they always promise — but nothing was erected by showtime. So, along with everything else, I had that to worry about during the performance.

Tonight, at least, the violence was limited to the dance floor. I was more than a little relieved that nothing got onto the stage from the rest of the room other than some saliva and spattered blood.

The guys played their fuckin' hearts out. So did the stranger who called himself Ringo. But there were still those odd rhythms in his drum work that I didn't think were anything as simple as just a lack of talent or coordination or anything like that.

It was more like the stranger functioned in some kind of slightly different time zone. Forget roots-rock, then. Maybe just go ahead and call what the group was doing tonight new music. Not atonal. Not antitonal. Just different. New.

The drummer kept skirting what Kenny was doing with his lead. Sometimes barely lagging, sometimes slightly anticipating. Other times, just drumming along in that barely different time line. There was something about this that reminded me of something Bobby T. had said. I couldn't remember exactly what. No matter.

At the end of the second set, the audience really *did* want an encore. Some of them had been listening. I was amazed. And Scorched Earth per-

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formed the hottest medley of moldy oldies and the coolest, sharpest "Wisconsin Death Trip" I'd ever heard. Wow. Yeah. For twelve minutes, it took twenty years off me.

Somebody in the crowd finally did get around to hurling an empty bottle, but it was halfhearted, and it was after the encore. The band had already trooped off the riser. The bottle just bounced off the far wall and lay on the ratty carpet behind the stage.

The guys and I shared a triumphant round of Lone Star. "The owner loved us," I said. "Damned if he didn't pay every cent he owed, no running poor-mouth." I paused dramatically. "He even wants us to stay around another week."

They all looked at each other. Kenny, Cotter, and Peach looked at the stranger.

"I can't," he said. "I will be leaving."

"It's good money," I said.

He nodded. "I don't need the money." He handed back the twenties I'd just given him.

"You mean it?" said Peach. "You're really taking off?" He seemed to be 100 percent converted to the side of the stranger now.

"I mean it," he said. "I'm sorry."

"We're all sorry, too," I said.

He looked straight at me. "I mean it," he repeated.

"So do we."

"I love the music," he said to us all. Directly to me, he said, "Keep watching the stars."

And that was that.

Later on that night, an hour after the stranger had reluctantly relinquished Bobby T.'s sticks and left us, I dropped off the guys to celebrate back in the room at the Motel 6 and headed out toward the outskirts of town. I climbed the same low hill I'd scaled the night before and sat down to watch the stars.

I remembered what it was Bobby T. had said that had been nagging at my memory. One time, Bobby T. said that the reason drum machines were simply no good for any music with soul was that they were just that — soulless. The rhythm, Bobby T. told me, had to come from the blood, the heart, from life itself. It was the beat of the human heart, the rhythm that clocked us all.

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It came to me: different rhythms, different life.

The stranger couldn't stay because he had somewhere else to go. Fair enough.

But he loved the music.

I stayed there on that cold hill another hour under the twinkling stars. The sky turned slowly, and the meteors fell.

I kept counting the falling stars until finally I saw one that went against the grain of every other. It was on its way back up.

"So long, Ringo," I said.

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SCIENCE

ISAAC ASIMOV

THE VERY ERROR OF THE MOON

I SUPPOSE I have seen more comments in print about my towering ego than almost anybody. The most recent case (at the present writing) is in a review of a new edition of my essay-collection *The Roving Mind* (Prometheus Books, 1983), which the reviewer found "exhilarating." He then couldn't resist referring to my opinion of myself, but added a saving clause. He said, "The egotistic Asimov, who has plenty to be egotistic about—"

Well, I'll accept that.

The truth is, though, that I am an easy mark. There is such an obvious self-assurance about me, that everyone has the ambition to put me in my place; a sizable percentage of them succeed, and that helps keep me humble. In fact, I am sometimes put in my place when it seems to me there is no chance of its happening. I remember a prize example of this—

It was in 1972, I think, when I had just joined the Gilbert and Sullivan Society and was waiting for the festivities to begin. I didn't know the gentleman at my right, who was a bit older than I was, and he clearly didn't know me. A young man came up to me and asked very politely for my autograph, which I was glad to give. There then followed this conversation between myself and the man beside me.

Stranger (curiously): "Why did he ask you for your autograph?"

I (modestly): "I guess he recognized me."

Stranger (naturally): "Who are you?"

I: "I'm Isaac Asimov."

Stranger (at sea): "But why did he ask you for your autograph?"

I (sighing inwardly): "I'm a writer."

Stranger (perking up amazingly): My *son* is a writer. He has just published his second book. He has published two novels" (holding up two proud fingers) "on sports."

I: "Wonderful."

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Stranger: "What do you write?"

I (cautiously): "Different things."

Stranger: "Do you write books?"

I (wishing he'd stop): "Yes."

Stranger: "How many have you written?"

I (at my wit's end): "A few."

Stranger: "Come on. How many?"

I (suddenly annoyed, and anxious to put an end to it): "As of now, one hundred and twenty."

Stranger (totally unfazed): "Any of them on sports?"

I: "No."

Stranger (triumphant): "My son has written two novels. On *sports!*"

I (totally crushed): "Wonderful."

Something else that keeps me in my place is going back over my nearly three decades of *F & SF* essays and taking note of those that show me to be something less than prescient.

That doesn't happen often, of course. In fact, sometimes I do pretty well. Thus, in a recent issue of a magazine dealing with astronomy for the layman, a writer wrote about the distant "Oort cloud" of comets and said that "forward-looking scientists" now consider that such comets might someday become "stepping stones to the stars."

As it happens, I was forward-looking enough to suggest that very thing in my *F & SF* essay of October 1960, twenty-seven years ago. And, what's more, I called the article "Stepping Stones to the Stars."

Still, one lack of prescience somehow deflates any number of cases in which I was on the ball. Consider my article "Just Mooning Around," which appeared in the May 1963 issue of *F & SF*. In it, I talked about satellites in general, and when I got to Earth's Moon, I pointed out how different it was from other satellites (unusually large, unusually distant, and so on), and I admitted that I couldn't explain how it came to exist.

So let's go over the matter of the Moon in some detail, for now a solution has been thought of to the problem of how it comes to be there — but, to my great chagrin, not by me.

Of course, people haven't worried about this problem until recent times. On the fourth day of the Biblical version of the beginnings of the Universe, God said, "Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years: And let them be for lights in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth: and it was so. And God made two great lights; the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night: he made the stars also." (Genesis 1:14-16).

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The Moon was the "lesser light" referred to in the verses above, and I imagine that, in our Western past, the feeling was undoubtedly general that the Moon was merely a small, nearby lamp hung in the sky for the convenience of humanity, and that the reason it was there was that God put it there.

And yet, as long ago as 150 B.C., the Greek astronomer Hipparchus (190-120 B.C.) had worked out the distance of the Moon from the Earth by valid trigonometric methods and had found, correctly, that that distance was 60 times the Earth's radius.

The Greek scientist Eratosthenes (276-196 B.C.) had already calculated the Earth's circumference correctly, also by trigonometric methods, so that the Moon's real distance was known to Greek scholars as early as the 2nd Century B.C.

Modern measurements have somewhat refined the results, and the Moon's average distance from the Earth is now known to be 384,400 kilometers (238,900 miles). For the Moon to seem as large as it does in the sky from this distance means that is must be 3,480 kilometers (2,160 miles) in diameter.

It is not just a small lamp in the sky, then; it's a respectable world. In 1609, Galileo looked at the Moon through his telescope and saw mountains, craters and "seas," and in 1969, human beings stood on the Moon. It's a world all right; it makes as much sense to doubt that as to doubt evolution.

Now the scientific game is to explain how the Moon happens to be in the sky, and to do so by making use of the laws of nature as we understand them. That's not easy, but if it *were* easy, it wouldn't be fun, would it?

Among the earliest of those who made a stab at explaining the origin of the Earth, without calling on the supernatural for help, was Georges de Buffon (1707-1788), a French naturalist who wrote a 44-volume encyclopedia of natural history. In the first volume, published in 1759, he took up the matter of origins.

A comet, he suggested, struck the Sun and sent some of its substance, together with some of the Sun's substance, flying into space. That flying matter cooled, condensed, and became the planets, including Earth. This, he said had happened 75,000 years earlier, for it would take that long for the Earth to cool to its present state.

Why a comet, by the way? In Buffon's time, no one knew what a comet actually was, but they sometimes looked very huge in the sky (though that hugeness consists of nothing more than a slightly thick vacuum), and they had orbits that

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brought them quite close to the Sun. Besides, in Buffon's time comets were the "in" thing in astronomy, since Halley's prediction of the return of his comet had been fulfilled just before the book was published. Actually we had best suppose that by "comet," Buffon merely meant "a massive body."

And the Moon? Buffon speculated that it was torn out of the Earth, as the Earth had been torn out of the Sun.

Don't think that Buffon got away with these daring suggestions, by the way. The creationists of the 18th Century were in power, and they did not look kindly on independent thought then, any more than they do today. Buffon was forced to take it all back and to say he had only been kidding.

The year after Buffon's death, however, the French Revolution took place and things eased up, at least as far as disagreeing with creationism was concerned.

Thus, as a result of the two centuries of observations and thought that has taken place since Buffon's time, astronomers are reasonably satisfied that they know how the Solar system started. It began as a vast cloud of dust and gas that may have existed for billions of years, and then suddenly began contracting — perhaps under the impulse of a shock wave from a nearby supernova.

Much of it collapsed toward what was eventually to become the Sun. Outside the forming Sun was a large disc of dust and gas — like those that have recently been found to be surrounding stars such as Vega and Beta Pictoris.

In 1944, the German astronomer Carl Friedrich von Weizsacker (b. 1912) considered this outer disc of dust and gas and presented reasons for supposing it to form eddies and sub-eddies.

These whirling eddies would carry material into collisions in the regions of intersection. As a result of these collisions, larger bits of matter would grow at the expense of the smaller ones. Eventually, the surviving bits would be large enough to be worth the name, "planetesimals," ("small planets"). With continuing collisions the larger planetesimals would sweep up the smaller ones until today's planets were formed. They would be separated by larger and larger distances as one went outward from the Sun, since the eddies themselves had been progressively larger with distance.

In the outer Solar system, where cooler temperatures allowed more of the very light and very plentiful elements, hydrogen and helium, to be collected, the planets grew large in consequence, and around them smaller eddies formed which gave rise to satellites.

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Earth is a small planet, so why should it have such a large satellite?

The formation of the Solar system began, it is clear, about 4,600,000,000 years ago, and it had reached essentially its present shape by 4,000,000,000 years ago.

Earlier versions of this condensing-nebula origin of the Solar system, some dating back to 1755, had come a cropper over the question of angular momentum (which is a measure of all the turning motions such as rotation about an axis and revolution about a center of gravity). Of the total angular momentum of the Solar system, the Sun (with 99.9 percent of the total mass of the system) has but 2 percent. The planets have the other 98 percent. Jupiter alone has 60 percent of the total.

Nobody could figure out how all that angular momentum could be crowded into the planets, and for a long time astronomers had given up the condensing-cloud bit. After Weizsacker's new analysis, however, a Swedish astronomer, Hannes Alfven (b. 1908), took the Sun's magnetic field into account. As the forming Sun whirled rapidly, its magnetic field twisted into a tight spiral and acted as a brake. The angular momentum couldn't disappear; it could only be transferred to the planets, which were forced into orbits that were farther from the Sun.

Even after the planets and satellites were just about formed, there were still a few planetesimals to be swept up. On those worlds that lack atmospheres, we can still see the marks of those last impacts. The craters on the Moon are most familiar to us, and in this era of rocket-probes, we have found craters also on Mercury, Mars, Phobos, Deimos, Ganymede, Callisto and other worlds.

Even today, there are objects such as comets, asteroids and meteoroids that have orbits that make them potential dangers.

But let's get on with the Moon.

A large planet, such as the four outer gas giants, might form satellites as the Sun formed planets, so we expect Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune to have many satellites, some of them quite large — and ring systems, too.

But Earth? Earth is a small planet, so why should it have a satellite — and such a large one? Of the other small inner planets, Mars has two tiny satellites that are obviously captured asteroids, while Venus and Mercury have nothing

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at all. Why does Earth have one?

There would seem to be three alternative explanations.

1) Earth formed as a single body, but then split in two for some reason, forming the Moon.

2) Earth and Moon formed separately, but out of the same eddy of dust and gas. They have always been separate worlds, but the Moon has always been a satellite.

3) Earth and Moon formed separately, but out of different eddies so that Moon was once an independent planet which was, however, captured by the Earth.

Alternative 2 must have happened at the very start. Alternatives 1 and 3 happened after the start but must have been catastrophic enough to wipe out any life that had gotten started. Life goes back uninterrupted for at least 3,500,000,000 years, so those alternatives must have happened, if they had happened at all, before then.

In 1879, the English astronomer George Howard Darwin (1845-1912) — the second son of Charles Darwin — attempted a rational explanation of the Moon's origin for the first time since Buffon.

Darwin began with the following situation, which was already well known in his time. The Moon sets up tides on the Earth, and the surface of the Earth, as the planet turns, moves progressively through the two tidal hepas of water on opposite sides of the Earth (see "Time and Tide," *F & SF*, May 1966).

As it does this, the water scrapes against the shallower sea bottoms and converts some of the energy of rotation into heat by friction. This slows the Earth's rotation to a very slight degree, lengthening the day by one second every 62,500 years.

This is not much but it decreases the angular momentum of the Earth, which can't be destroyed and which must therefore be transferred to the Moon, which is being forced away from the Earth very slowly, as a result.

Darwin pointed out that if one imagined the flow of time reversed, one could imagine the Moon to be slowly approaching the Earth, and angular momentum shifting from the Moon to the Earth, so that the Earth would be gaining speed little by little. As the Moon continued to approach the Earth, the tides would increase and the backward-spin of time would see the Moon approach Earth and Earth gain speed more quickly. Finally, the Moon would reach and coalesce with the Earth, which would be spinning very rapidly indeed.

Now let time flow forward again. The Earth is spinning very rapidly, and the result is an equatorial bulge much greater than the one Earth has now. Since the Earth would be

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warmer and softer in those early days, the bulge would be all the greater, and a piece of it would finally break off and move away from the Earth. What was left of the Earth would have lost enough angular momentum to slow down markedly, and it would be stable thereafter.

This would explain several things. The Moon has only 3/5 the density of the Earth — but it pinched off the outer layers of the Earth (the rocky mantle) which has just that low density. The high-density metal core of the Earth remained untouched.

Then, too, the Moon has just the width of the Pacific Ocean. Could it be that that was where it pinched away, leaving the basin behind, encircled by the "ring of fire" (the volcanoes and earthquakes that rim the Pacific) as the still-unhealed wound of that rupture?

It sounded very good at the time, but we now know that the Pacific Ocean bit is all wrong. The ocean's shape and the ring of fire is all explained by modern plate tectonics, and it has nothing to do with the Moon. What's more, if all the angular momentum of the Earth-Moon system were squeezed into the Earth alone, it wouldn't have enough spin to throw off the Moon. It wouldn't even be close. The total spin is only one-fourth of that which would be required. Darwin's theory just won't work, therefore, and astronomers seemed quite agreed that alternative one is out and that Earth and Moon were never a single body.

What about alternative two? Might not Earth's eddy have had two nuclei so that two worlds developed, and done so far enough apart never to meet and coalesce? It might be much more usual for a single nucleus to collect the overwhelming amount of matter in its eddy, but unusual things happen sometimes, and the Earth-Moon system is certainly unusual.

After all, the four large satellites of Jupiter, taken all together, are only 1/5000th the mass of Jupiter. All of Saturn's satellites, taken together, are about 1/4000 the mass of Saturn. The Moon, on the other hand, is 1/80th the mass of the Earth, and perhaps that is the sign that we just happened to be the victim (or the beneficiary) of an unusual case in which there was a double nucleus.

In fact, we now know we aren't even the only case of this. In 1978, Pluto's satellite, Charon, was discovered, and it turns out that Charon is about 1/10th the mass of Pluto. To be sure Pluto and Charon are much smaller than Earth and Moon are, and they are icy, in all likelihood, while we are rocky. It

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may be unsafe to draw comparisons. Still, it is *possible* that Pluto and Charon are another example of two nuclei in the same eddy.

Still, if that were so, Earth and Moon should have roughly the same composition. It's not reasonable to suppose that virtually all the iron in the cloud was on our side and practically none on the Moon's side. Yet the Earth has a large liquid-iron core, and the Moon has none. That is why the Moon has a density that is only 3/5 of ours. Such a density is explained by alternative one, but not by alternative two, and the latter seems to go glimmering also.

What about alternative three; that the Moon was originally formed in a different eddy?

Presumably, it was formed in an eddy that was closer to the Sun than ours was. That would explain why the Moon seems to be covered with glassy bits, although natural glass is very uncommon on Earth. It may be that the Moon was exposed to much more heat.

That would also account for the fact that the Moon is lower in the content of volatile elements than the Earth is. It's not only that it's short of carbon, hydrogen and nitrogen, but also of metals like sodium, potassium, tin and lead. Again, it has been exposed to much more heat.

It might also account for the fact that it is so short of iron. Perhaps the eddy in which it was formed had less iron to begin with so that it ended up being formed almost entirely out of rock.

Actually, none of this is entirely compelling. Venus and Mercury have iron-cores, so that those eddies closer to the Sun than ours was obviously had plenty of iron. And if the Moon were formed in an eddy farther from the Sun than ours was, why doesn't it have volatiles — at least the metallic ones?

Worse than all this is the fact that it is not easy for one body to capture another, particularly if the other is itself a large body. We might imagine the Moon to have a very elliptical orbit to begin with, swinging toward Mercury at one end, and toward Earth at the other. This would be hard to explain, but assuming it to be so and supposing that the Moon were to approach the Earth rather closely, it would swing about it in a hyperbolic orbit and speed away. Its orbit would be changed but it would not be captured. Indeed, astronomers have tried to work out some set of circumstances whereby the Moon would be captured by the Earth and have failed to do so in any credible way.

As a result, alternative three doesn't look good, either.

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This has frustrated astronomers in a way that reminds me of Othello, saying about the Moon under different circumstances: "It is the very error of the Moon . . . . and makes men mad."

One astronomer is reported to have said, in total exasperation, "When we consider the various ways in which the Moon might have been formed, and how unsatisfactory they all are, the only conclusion we can come to about the Moon is that *it isn't there.*"

Well, then, what are we going to do? If only three alternatives are possible and if every one of the three is eliminated, are we forced back to creationism?

No, that pitch of desperation we have not reached. What we need is a fourth alternative. It may be that the three I've mentioned are *not*, after all, the only ones possible.

Fortunately, as early as 1974, William K. Hartmann of the Planetary Science Institute in Tucson, Arizona (along with some co-workers) *did* suggest a fourth alternative.

Suppose we go back to alternative two. Let's suppose that as the planetesimals accreted into a planet in Earth's orbit, they *did* accrete into two bodies. The second, smaller body, however, was not *the* Moon. There's the point that everyone seems to have missed.

It was a second body just like the Earth in chemical composition, since it was formed out of the same eddy. It *did* have a metal iron core, just as Earth does, and it had the same volatile materials Earth had. What's more, it may not have been as small as the Moon. It may have been the size of Mars, or a bit larger, with a mass from 1/10 to 1/7 that of the Earth. We would then have been a truer double planet than even Pluto and Charon are.

But what happened to this companion of the Earth, which was not the Moon? Well, the two objects may have revolved about a common center of gravity, but in a quite elliptical way, which would mean a close approach each revolution. There were still somewhat smaller planetesimals about, and both bodies may have been struck this way and that by them so that they underwent a kind of Brownian motion on a cosmic scale. That would give them both rather erratic orbits, and the two worlds may have *collided* glancingly, at some time more than 4,000,000,000 years ago, at a mutual speed of 8 to 10 kilometers (5 to 6 miles) per second.

In less than an hour, the deed was done, and a portion of the outer layers of each object was smashed and sliced off and shattered, and in part vaporized and launched into space. What was left of both worlds

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then coalesced to form the Earth as it now is.

Observe the consequences. The two metal iron cores remained put, and when the two planets coalesced, it formed one core, so that Earth's present core is a combination of both original cores.

The smashed layers that were hurled into space might, to some extent, have eventually pattered back to Earth, or, in part, escaped permanently. That portion, however, which had vaporized could condense and eventually collect into a single world.

That *new* world would have been formed only out of the outer layers of the colliding world, out of the rocky mantles, and it would have no metal iron core worth mentioning. It would have a density of only 3/5 that of Earth. What's more, the amount that coalesced would in no case be as large as the original companion. With so much of the interloper fusing with Earth and with so much of the sliced-off portion coming back to Earth or drifting away altogether, the Moon that finally formed would only be about 1/10 the mass of the original proto-Moon.

Finally, the sliced-off portion of the outer layers would have been subjected to the heat produced by the collision, and when the vapors condensed, those of the volatile elements did so to an unusually small extent. That would explain why the Moon is short of volatile elements and long on glassy remnants.

In short, this alternative four avoids all the difficulties associated with the other three and seems to introduce no major difficulties of its own.

Even so, Hartmann's 1974 suggestion was largely ignored. Scientists don't like catastrophic solutions that seem to depend on the happening of some low-probability event. Slow and inevitable evolutionary solutions appeal to them much more.

After 1974, however, computer simulations were made of the situation and what showed on the computer screen seemed quite good. In 1984, when the idea was advanced again, with computer simulations as back-up, there was considerable enthusiasm. Pending a closer look at every stage of the supposed impact, astronomers think they have a way of accounting for the existence of the Moon.

And now I've got to explain my personal chagrin at falling short of prescience.

If you'll think about it, alternative four is *exactly* Buffon's idea of 2¼ centuries ago. He had Earth formed by a glancing collision with a Sun of a smaller but, nevertheless, mas-

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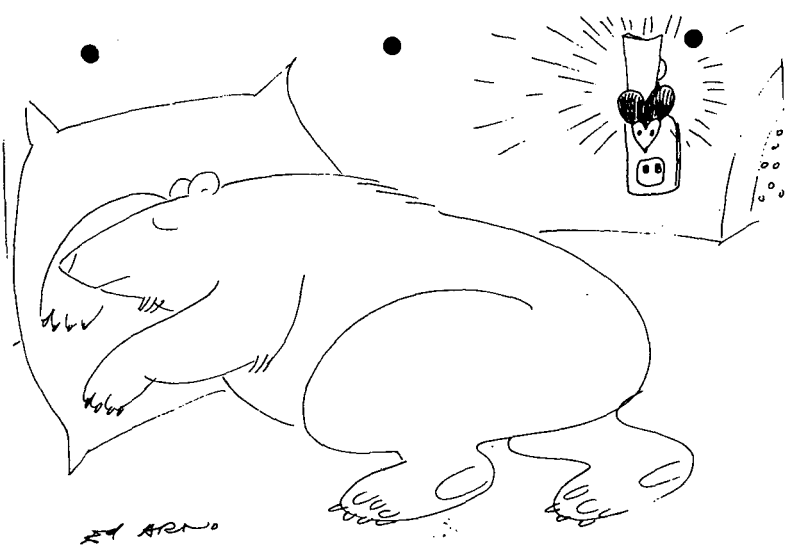
sive body. He then suggested that the Moon was torn from the Earth, and one would have to assume that he was thinking of the same mechanism.

Well, then, the Moon may *well* have been formed in that way and, since Buffon had suggested it, and I knew about the suggestion, and it wasn't one of the three alternatives that I had brainwashed myself into thinking were the only ones possible — why didn't *I* see that Buffon was offering us all the fourth alternative, and suggested it twenty-seven years ago?

On the other hand, it makes me aware that there are limits to my "smartness" and that realization may be healthy for that supposedly-swollen ego of mine.

Isaac Asimov, F&SF's science columnist since 1958, was a recent recipient of the Science Fiction Writers of America Grand Master Nebula Award. This award is given to a living author for a lifetime's achievement in science fiction. It was presented at the SFWA's awards dinner in May 1987.



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From one of England's most accomplished and versatile storytellers, author of the classic novel, PAVANE, comes this compelling new tale about the spirited young Londoner named Kaeti, whose life frequently takes unexpected and odd turns, such as the acquisition of The Tiger Sweater. Mr. Roberts' most recent books are GRAINNE, a novel, and KAETI & COMPANY.

THE TIGER SWEATER

By Keith Roberts

KAETI CROSSED THE LITtle High Street, dodging between the traffic. For once she had an hour to kill; unusual, midmorning. She intended to spend it in the little coffeehouse she'd grown so fond of over the past few months, take a decent elevenses for once. She had a shop to look in first, though. As she'd done most days these past couple of weeks. Window-shopping wasn't her favorite pastime as a rule; this was different, though. "Prob'ly be gone by now anyway," she muttered to herself. "Bound to 'ave. . . ." She hurried on.

Wetherby's was a big, handsome establishment on the corner of the little alleyway that led to the old Delphi Inn. Its fascia, with the faded, curlicued gilt lettering, exuded quality, as did the dresses and lingerie displayed in the tall old window beneath. The prices sometimes made Kaeti grit her teeth, but she had to admit the stock was always good. The shop was run, and had been run for many years, by two elderly spinster

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sisters for whom Kaeti had a definite soft spot. They still lived, determinedly, in the age of the twinset and pearl necklace; their silver hair was identically and neatly permed; and on the ample bosom of each usually hung a pair of horn-rimmed specs, suspended by a little loop of cord. She always imagined the cakestand Sunday afternoons, the plate of cucumber sarnies with its neat white doily.

The Misses Wetherby were perfectly in keeping with their shop; or the shop with them. Dark woodwork was much in evidence; there were units heaped with bright frillies, others with sturdier, more sensible garments. While on the long, polished counter stood a big old-fashioned till, its silver backplate beautifully patterned with sprays to thistles and roses. The appearance of the window likewise seldom varied; there were dresses on stands, suits of neat, sober tweed; and to either side the ebony figures of a classical god and goddess, their shapely limbs usually draped with a collection of bright silk scarves. It wasn't the figures, though, at which she stared.

It was still there. On its own, in the exact center of the window, hung the wonderful tiger sweater. As ever, she caught her breath a little. She'd never seen a piece of knitting like it. It was in mohair, and boat-necked; always becoming, she thought, for someone with pretty shoulders. The full sleeves tapered to neat cuffs; while on the front, and filling most of it, was a great tiger's head. The fluffy wool made the colors seem to run and blend, as if the creature were peering from a mist; but its eyes snapped and blazed, and it mouth was open in a great red snarl that showed its tongue and fangs. It was awe-inspiring, a little scary almost; but it was beautiful. She pressed unconsciously closer to the glass. "'Tyger, tyger, burnin' bright,'" she whispered, "'In the forests o' the night. . . .'"

She shook her head. The thing always had the same effect on her. Hypnotic almost. She decided she must really still be a kid at heart.

She hesitated. As a junior reporter on the *Advertiser*, it wasn't her job to dig up village gossip. They had an old boy who did that for them, a retired BBC man; he was always to be seen round the town center pubs, knocking back his G and T's and keeping his ears pricked for tidbits. This was his sort of thing rather than hers. On the other hand, he'd been getting a bit frail lately; last week he'd turned in only a column and a bit. And it was her free time, after all. She pushed the door open and went in. The elder Miss Wetherby looked up with a smile. "Good morning, Kaeti," she

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said. "What can we do for you, business or pleasure?"

"Bit o' both," said Kaeti. "Mornin', Miss Wetherby. . . ." She hesitated again. There had been other sweaters in the same style: deer and rabbits, all sorts of things. Nothing like the tiger, though. "Who knits those woollies for yer?" she said. "The mohair ones, with the animals on?"

Miss Wetherby looked suddenly cautious. "Why do you ask?" she said.

"Jus' wondered," said Kaeti. "Never seen nothin' like 'em. Thought it might make a feature. Do you a bit o' good as well."

Miss Wetherby pulled thoughtfully at her lip. "Well," she said, "I don't suppose it would do any harm now. . . ." She closed the pattern book at which she'd been staring absently. "An Indian lady," she said. "A Mrs. Gupta. A rather . . . well, rather an *odd* person, I thought, in some respects. Always polite, of course. But then, the Indians *are* polite. My late brother often remarked on it, and he was there for many years. An excellent needlewoman, though; really quite remarkable. . . ."

"Where does she live?"

"Do you know that big house out at Duckett's Cross?" said Miss Wetherby. "The one that stands on its own, just before you turn down to the village?"

"Yeah," said Kaeti. "Yeah, I do." For some reason she suppressed a shiver. She'd been out that way a few times with Rod and his wife; there was a pub they favored in the village, the Hare and Hounds. The house — something or other Lodge, it said on the gate — lay back from the road, surrounded and partly masked by a tall screen of trees. It was a big, gaunt-looking place with big, dark windows at the front; she'd never seen a light in any of them. Once, though, when they were driving back, the sun had been setting behind it; the red glow shone right through and made it look like a skeleton. "D'yer think she'd do an interview?" said Kaeti.

Miss Wetherby shook her head. "She was always . . . well, a rather private person," she said. "Reserved. But in any case, she's gone away. Last week, I think it was. She said she was going back to India. I believe, though I'm not sure, the house is to be put up for sale."

So much for that, then. She should have come in sooner. "Don't matter," said Kaeti. "Thanks, anyway. Did you sell the rest of the sweaters?"

"Oh yes," said the old lady. "Snapped up rather quickly, in fact. I always felt she should have — ah — priced them a little higher."

"'Ow much did they go for?"

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"It varied a little, of course," said Miss Wetherby. She named a couple of figures that made Kaeti wince. She supposed it could have been worse, though. She imagined what things like that would fetch in town. "I s'pose there's a lot o' work in 'em, though," she said. "All that knittin' in the backs." She'd done a feature on Fair Isle jumpers a week to two before, for a little fashion spot they ran from time to time; amazing, the bits and pieces you picked up, working for a paper.

"Oh, they weren't done like that," said Miss Wetherby. "The wool was on little bobbins, so she could pick up each color as she needed it. She brought one in to show me once, half finished. It was like a little tapestry."

"Cor," said Kaeti, "I din' know you could knit like that." She took her notebook out and began to scribble. Maybe there was something to be saved after all.

"Neither did I," said Miss Wetherby. "But then, I never was the world's greatest knitter. My sister, Alice, was the one. Still is, come to that. You should talk to her. But she's away today. Visiting friends in Eastbourne. . . ."

"That's a'right," said Kaeti. "Did Mrs. Gupta make 'er own patterns up? I 'eard you could do it on graph paper."

"I suppose so," said the dress shop owner. "Yes, she must have done. I never really asked her. She was . . . well, a rather secretive lady in some respects. Mysterious, one might almost say."

Kaeti could believe that. "So there's only that one left?" she said.

"Yes," said Miss Wetherby. "Just that one." She considered, then seemed to reach a decision. "Would you like to see it?" she said.

"I . . . yes, please," said Kaeti. "If it ain't no bother."

"No trouble at all," said the other. She pottered to the window, unlatched one of the head-high panels at the back, and reached in. "There," she said. "What do you think?"

Kaeti gasped. Up close, the thing was more spectacular than ever. The tiger's eyes blazed bright, even in the genteel gloom of the shop. They looked alive, somehow, as if they'd follow you, whenever you moved about. She reached out hesitantly, then touched the thing at last. "It's beautiful," she said.

"Yes," said Miss Wetherby. "It is magnificent, isn't it? Almost — well, almost too realistic, in a way. Mrs. Gupta did tell me — in confidence, that is — that she considered it her finest work. And that she would probably do no more. Which would be *such* a waste, of course. A very

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great talent. . . ." She shook her head.

Kaeti took the plunge. " 'Ow much is it, Miss Wetherby?" she said.

An odd look came over the other's face. Part puzzlement, certainly, part indecision; but there was something else, something Kaeti was quite unable to place. "Have you got a few minutes?" she said. "Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"I . . . ta," said Kaeti. "Yes, thanks very much. I would. . . ."

"Moira," said the old woman, "see to the shop, will you? I'm going through the back. . . ." She took the sweater with her.

Kaeti followed, into a little office. Wood-paneled like the rest of the establishment. "At least," she thought, "it's safe. It's out of the window now." The idea quite shocked her. She wanted the tiger sweater; she'd wanted it all along — like she'd never wanted anything before. She'd never admitted it, though. Not really, not till now. It was crazy, though. The thing was show-off, flashy almost; she just didn't go for that sort of gear, it wasn't her style. She swallowed. It was no good. She had to have it, she just had to; whatever it might cost.

"Do sit down, my dear," said Miss Wetherby. "I shan't be long." She vanished next door.

Kaeti picked the sweater up. She held it close, just for the feel and warmth. She stroked the texture of the wool, seeing how the colored strands could be made to move and waver. As if they were blowing in the breeze. The tiger glared, but he didn't seem to mind. "It's how you treat him," she thought vaguely. "If you love him, it's all right. He wouldn't hurt you then. . . ."

Miss Wetherby was back, carrying cups and saucers on a little tray. There was a cream jug, too, and a bowl of fine blond sugar. "Do help yourself," she said.

Kaeti started guiltily and put the garment down. "I . . .ta," she said.

Miss Wetherby sat down herself and frowned. It seemed she was coming to another decision, momentous this time. Finally she looked up. "My grandfather founded this firm," she said. "My father, as I'm sure you know, followed him into the trade. Of course, that was all a very long long time ago."

"Yeah," said Kaeti. "Must 'a' bin." She wondered what on earth was coming next.

"Yes, a very long time ago," said Miss Wetherby again. She spooned

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sugar and stirred. "My grandfather had one principle," she said. "As a tiny child, I heard him say it so often. 'A fair price, for a fair product.' It seems I can still hear him saying it. He dinned it into all of us, of course, making sure we never forgot." She smiled, a little sadly. "We still try to live by it," she said. "Which is no doubt silly, in this day and age. But a principle is a principle; in our own quiet way, we take pride in it."

Kaeti frowned. She couldn't see for the life of her where all this was heading.

Miss Wetherby came to the point abruptly. "Mrs. Gupta *gave* us that garment," she said. "It was a parting present. So you see, we couldn't really *sell* it." She frowned again. "If you want it, take it, Kaeti," she said. "It's yours. . . ."

Kaeti gasped and nearly spilled her coffee. "But I couldn't," she said. "I couldn't, Miss Wetherby, reely. . . ."

The other waved a hand. "No," she said. "You're getting it for what we paid. We wouldn't do it for anyone, of course; but you're . . . well, Alice and I have always had a great fondness for you. You haven't been in town long, but you've worked hard and bettered yourself. That makes you rather special." She watched Kaeti carefully and shrugged. "As a matter of fact," she said, "I haven't been entirely honest. At least, I told only part of the truth. Alice has . . . well, she has certain feelings about that item. She . . . er . . . dislikes it. To put it bluntly, she would like it out of the shop. For myself . . . I do try to disregard such things. Presentiments and the like. On the other hand, one can't help wondering sometimes. . . ." She smiled again. "In any case," she said, "you must admit it's hardly the Wetherby image. . . ."

Kaeti's ears seemed to be singing, and for some reason she felt hot all over. "Miss Wetherby," she said. "No. Reely, no. . . ." But the other would brook no more argument. "I can see how much you want it," she said. "Go and try it on. You know where the cubicles are; I'm sure, though, it will be perfect. . . ."

Kaeti held the sweater to her chest again and peered into the mirror. The tiger glared back from the glass. She slipped out of her jacket, then paused a moment, biting her lip. Then she pulled her shirt over her head. Why, she had no idea; except that it somehow seemed right. She slipped the woolly on and gasped. It seemed a warmth came from it, a warmth that flooded right through her. She'd worn mohair before, of course; but it had never felt like that. She tried a profile and did a Carmen job with one hip

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stuck out. She supposed the sweater didn't really go with the jeans; somehow, though, it didn't seem to matter. You didn't notice anything else, only the tiger.

The proprietress called through the curtain. "Well, Kaeti, how is it?"

"It's marvelous, Miss Wetherby," breathed Kaeti. "It's marvelous. . . ."

She was late back at the office. She'd said she'd be in by midday, but she detoured to drop the sweater off at the flat. She hadn't wanted to — it had been a wrench even taking it off — but she had a funny idea Kerry wouldn't approve. "Sorry," she said as she walked in. "I got a bit 'eld up."

The Irish/black smiled at her. She was wearing the acid-yellow dress again — Kaeti always thought privately it suited her best — and her hair was done round in the funny little pigtails she favored, each finished with a vivid yellow bead. She'd told Kaeti once it took all night to get it right; she wondered why she still kept bothering. It was part of her, though; she wouldn't seem the same without it. "That's O.K.," she said, "there's nothing much come in. Get the stuff you wanted from the old chap?"

"Yeah," said Kaeti. "Marvelous things, racin' pigeons. 'Ad one come back five 'undred miles; they let it orf in Scotland. They send 'em about by train sometimes, ter see 'ow far they'll fly."

"Great," said Kerry. "Sorry Toby couldn't come; you could have wrapped it up in one."

"That's a'right," said Kaeti. " 'E said 'e'd get the pics first thing tomorrer, do 'em straightaway. I can get my stuff done this afternoon — will that be a'right?"

"Fine," said the black girl. "It isn't screaming anyway; we can always hold it over." She glanced at the big wall calendar. "Let's see, you've got that Town Hall job later on, haven't you?"

"Yeah," said Kaeti. "Toby's takin' me round." She swallowed. The local MP was visiting, the first time in about eighteen months; though since they'd made him minister, he hadn't had much time for people like constituents. Privately, she was a bit worried; it was still the biggest job she'd handled on her own. Reception in the mayor's parlor, the lot. She thought she'd probably been given it because she'd got that bit about burning the loo seat every time the queen stopped off, in case somebody sold it for a souvenir. She'd interviewed the old bloke who had to do it. Kerry hadn't run the item, of course, but it had made her laugh; she said at least it

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showed initiative. "Anythin' you want me ter pump 'im about?" she said.

Kerry shook her head. "You won't pump him," she said. "He's far too old a hand. You probably won't get much chance anyway. He'll be here and gone; if you blink, you'll miss him. You'd better try the usual: housing problem, one-parent families, that sort of stuff. Oh, and what he's doing about the bypass. We all know the answer, of course, damn all; but it'll interesting to see how he waffles round it this time."

Kaeti scribbled rapidly. "Youth Center?" she said. "Supermarket?"

"Could do," said Kerry. "Youth Center's a bit of a chestnut, of course; the readers must be sick of it. Supermarket's probably a good idea. You know: We've got two; who wants a third? You won't get anywhere, of course. There's £2 million riding on that deal already; old Standish is probably up to his elbows in it himself."

Kaeti nodded. Standish was the mayor. She said, " 'Ospital annex?"

"You won't get time for that," said her editor. "Shouldn't think so anyway. Don't forget the Northerton mob will be there in force." She looked at her watch. "I've got to go out," she said. "You nip off, Kaeti; I'll see you later on."

"Right," said Kaeti. "Thanks a lot. Ta-ta. . . ."

"Good luck," said the black girl, to the closing door.

Kaeti hurried downstairs and nipped out through the shop. They were a stationer's as well, of course: Est. 1880, that sort of thing. As ever, she turned her nose up at the racks of cards. It was fluffy chicks at Easter, jolly Father Christmases; one day they'd get a buyer with some taste. Still, they sold; so she supposed it was what people wanted. She headed toward town center, past the long wall of the printing works. Least, it had been the printing works once, in the good old letterpress days; they'd switched to litho just after she moved down, and the whole shooting match had moved to a little industrial estate about eight miles out. It had been rotten seeing all the old machinery go: she was an inveterate hoarder; she hated throwing anything away. Still, she supposed printing presses were a bit different; couldn't have too many of those stood about. And they could print sixteen up in the new place now instead of eight; it had cut the lead time by a day and a half. Print quality was top class, too; they could show the nationals the way any day. There'd been the usual complaints, of course, about the ink coming off on your fingers — but letterpress ink had

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been as bad or worse; nothing was really new. There'd been letters about it for weeks; she'd got fed up in the end and forged one herself, all about the new technology tainting fish-and-chips. The result had been unexpected; the health people had descended in force, grilling all the local food shops about using unhygenic wrappings. She'd been a bit alarmed about all the fuss and bother; she'd got away with it, though. Well, almost. "Kaeti," said Kerry a few days later, "I know they used to say if you can't find the news, go out and make it. But don't do it here. . . ." There'd been a twinkle in her eye, and she hadn't split on her to Mr. Tom; but Kaeti still hadn't chanced her arm again.

She passed the Salisbury Club. They were all supposed to be Conservatives in there; but she'd heard more left-wing stuff talked, the odd times she'd been in, than anywhere else in town. She frowned. They had one Ladies' Night a week; the rest of the time the big bar was still men only. Not that she gave a damn — they were all a load of twits anyway —it was the principle of the thing. She'd been tempted for a time to get Tina and her mates to do some gate-crashing. She could be on hand herself; and Tody, the staff photographer, was always game for a laugh. She hadn't though — the letter business had been bad enough; she had a distinct idea it would be the end of her time with the *Advertiser*. Any anyway, she didn't want to upset Kerry, who'd been real good to her.

She liked the black girl a lot. Admired her as well, of course. Kerry'd given her her first real break. She remembered that initial interview, a couple of years ago now. Sitting nervous on the edge of her chair, her hands between her knees. There were green trees over the road, and a red and cream Congregational church with a gilded board outside. She watched the tree uncertainly while Kerry talked. She'd never felt too sure of herself outside town. That was stupid, though, really. Admittedly, this was a village; but London was only villages, all joined together like the pieces of a patchwork quilt. You couldn't live in all of it at once. Anyway, she hadn't had much choice. "Start in the provinces," they'd said. All the people she'd talked to. "The sticks, if you have to. Then you can work your way up. Everybody does." She supposed it was right. Maybe some did make it from day one, start at the top, but they'd be the lucky few. In any case, she doubted she had that sort of skill. Then someone gave her an old copy of *Brad*. She was surprised, appalled almost, when she saw the lists of papers: hundreds of them, everywhere in the country. She'd started writing

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round nonetheless; the Thames Valley first, because she didn't want to be stuck in somewhere where she didn't know a soul, and couldn't get back to town even if she was going mad. It was still a daunting project, though. Most of them just hadn't wanted to know; this was only about the third real interview she'd had.

Being seen by a black girl was a shock as well. About the last thing she'd expected, certainly in a place like this. Though she wasn't really black at all, of course, more a sort of lovely coffee color. But then, her mother had been Irish. Kerry'd told her quite early on; Kaeti still hadn't managed to sort it out. And Kerry was really beautiful, broad cheekbones and huge dark candid eyes. If she realized the effect she'd caused, though, she gave no sign of it. "Well, Kaeti," she said, "tell me about yourself." She inclined her head. "Smoke if you like; there's a tray there."

"Thanks," said Kaeti. "Ta. I . . . not at the minute," she said. She thought she'd nearly fallen into some sort of trap; though knowing Kerry better, she doubted it had been a trap at all. She started, haltingly at first. Details of background, schooling, previous experience; though in her case that amounted to nil. Well, you couldn't call editing a school magazine experience, could you? And anyway, it had run to only three issues.

Kerry smiled. "Who started it?" she said.

"I did," said Kaeti defensively. "Well, there was about three of us. I did most on it, though."

"Including writing the material?"

Kaeti nodded dumbly. "Mostly," she said.

The other smiled again. "I know the feeling," she said. "I did much the same, once on a time." She rose and stood, arms folded, looking out of the window. "Why do you want to be a journalist?" she said.

Kaeti opened her mouth and shut it. She'd known this would be the difficult bit. She'd sat an hour on the train thinking up all sorts of fancy reasons; but they'd all gone out of her head. "I don't know," she said. "I just do."

Kerry swung back. "How do you see yourself?" she said. "A sort of knight in armor, fighting fraud, exposing wrongs, that sort of thing?"

Kaeti didn't answer.

"I won't be anything like you imagine," said the black girl remorselessly. "This is a small country town. No breathtaking scandals, no nice juicy murders. It'll be cricket scores in the summer, football and rugger in

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the winter; up the nick to see who's been done for speeding, round the WI's to see who won the jam making — that's what the job is, Kaeti. For the most part, anyway."

"There'll still be people," said Kaeti. "People are always worth writin' about." She was conscious how lame it sounded as soon as she had said it.

"People are always worth writing about," said the black girl musingly. "You know where your deathless prose will finish up? They'll use it to line cat pans. They'll wipe paintbrushes on it, ball it up to light the garden bonfire. Some of it will be hung in loos." She changed tack abruptly. "What makes you think you'd be good at it?" she said.

Kaeti had had enough. The interview had gone about as wrong as it could; there wasn't really anything to lose. "Because I ain't thick," she snapped. "I don't write like I talk, neither. I puts verbs in. I can spell an' all. . . ."

To her surprise, the other started to laugh. It was a nice laugh, rich and deep; she sounded genuinely amused. "That's more than you can say for our comps, most of the time," she said. "Cool it, Kaeti. I've been putting you through it a bit, but that's part of my job." She leaned back. "If you'd come up with a lot of smart answers," she said, "you'd have got a big black mark. There's only one reason why any of us do anything: because we want to. Most of the time, we can none of us explain." She considered. "I like your style," she said. "And I must say, it could be interesting. *La Belle Sauvage* and a Bermondsey Bombshell. The town would never be the same again. . . ."

She'd reached the flat. She let herself in and put a kettle on to boil. She fed paper into the typer, got her notebook, and opened it. She started to tap. Crispbread and cheese would do for lunch; she wasn't really hungry anyway.

There'd been another interview, of course. That was the first time she'd met Mr. Tom. His father had founded the business; it was a bit like Wetherby's. She decided she liked him. She'd thought he was a bit formal and old-fashioned at first, but she supposed he had to be. After all, he was chairman of the magistrates, all sorts. There was something about him, though; when he said he was pleased to meet her, he really sounded as if he meant it. And after all, he had taken Kerry on; that must count for a lot. Just how much, she found out later. "This is a family business," he said kindly. "We still like to think of ourselves as exactly that. And it's a very

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small town. How do you think you'd fit in?"

"I don't know, sir," said Kaeti frankly. "But I'll do me best."

He beamed. "Yes," he said, "I'm sure you would." She glanced across the table, caught a quick flash from Kerry, and decided the decision had already been reached. She took a deep breath and released it. There were other questions, of course, lots of them; but she found she could answer them more readily. For the first time, it seemed she could genuinely relax.

Kerry laughed about it afterward. "You hadn't been chosen, really," she said. "You were short-listed with another two. I pushed for you pretty hard, but it was still up to him. After all, he picks the tab up." She gave one of her sudden grins. "He's not the old stick-in-the-mud he seems," she said. "He's still a sucker for a pretty face. And hazel eyes," she added as an afterthought.

"Tha's nice," said Kaeti. " 'Ow about findin' me somethin' ter do, then?"

She'd guessed Kerry's appointment must have caused a bit of an upheaval. Just how big it had been, she found out by going through the files. The first thing she came on was a front-page picture of Kerry, posed elegantly in a very fetching dress. A seventy-two-point headline announced her appointment; Kaeti wouldn't have suspected the *Advertiser* of harboring such a font. The next week's issue featured a picture of Mr. Tom standing by a bonfire; beside him were two more sacks of protest letters, waiting to be destroyed. So there hadn't been just an upheaval; there'd been a war.

He'd followed up the visual attack with a swinging editorial. "*Kerry Jameson,*" he thundered, "*has the skill and experience I, and the* Advertiser, *need. Under her, I am confident this newspaper will go from strength to strength. Have this country, and this town, learned nothing from two annihilating wars! Are petty spite and baseless prejudice to rule our lives forever? . . .*"

"Pretty with it, an' all," muttered Kaeti sardonically. She shook her head. The protests hadn't, it seemed, come from the quarter she might have expected. The True Blues of the neighborhood — retired bank managers, old colonels, and the like — had reacted with one voice. "Give the gal a chance. . . ." It was the semis and the council estates that had snarled. It was all food for thought.

The kettle was nearly boiled dry. Kaeti swore, topped it up, and made a mug of coffee. She buttered crispbreads and got stuck in again.

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The circulation figures told the rest of the story. A minor dip, a steeper one as folk realized the appointment was for real, then a slow climb. Circulation was holding steady now, at 5 percent higher than before. Maybe, though, the new look to the paper had helped. Kerry had obviously had a major hand in that. The *Advertiser* had been redesigned, from front to back, new typefaces introduced to match the new technology. Even the masthead had been changed: the old Inline Black Letter banished to a memory, a smart new bracket serif introduced. Which must have cost Mr. Tom more than the occasional pang. They'd resisted the temptation to drop to tabloid, though Kaeti did note with amusement one letter expressing apparent concern at the imminence of page-three nudes. "Though that," as Kerry had remarked philosophically, "is something we shall have to think some more about. After all, we can't rush all our fences. . . ."

Kaeti pulled the sheet from the typewriter, read through what she'd done, and made a few corrections. There'd been talk of buying a couple more processors; Mark, the senior reporter, would naturally have first call, but she wondered if she could talk Kerry into extending the budget. Direct links would be next, to the office and the works; they'd really be in business then.

It was one o'clock. Kaeti turned the telly on to catch the news, and lit a cigarette. Her first of the morning, she realized; she'd been too busy the rest of the time. She smoked it down and walked through to the bathroom. She brushed her teeth; then she turned, frowning. The bedroom door was open; lying across the bed was the tiger sweater.

Her heart gave a sort of hot zing and bound. For some reason she'd been deliberately putting the thing from her mind. She walked forward slowly and stood looking down at it. She scotched on the bed, pressed the sweater to her cheek, and turned the hem back to admire the workmanship. She frowned again, then on impulse she stripped off shirt and jeans. She shrugged herself into the woolly. Instantly the strange warm buzzing was back. She ran into the bathroom again and posed in front of the mirror. She pouted, pushed her hair up, and did a Bardot. The sensation really was extraordinary. She felt elated almost; she couldn't remember anything quite like it. "Page three, 'ere we come," she said, which wasn't like her either.

She really had to get on. This time, though, she couldn't bring herself to change back out of the sweater. Indeed, it was as if it positively refused

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to be removed. She tried halfheartedly twice, then gave up. "It's mine anyway," she thought, with a sudden flash of something that was almost temper. "I can wear it if I like. . . ." She got busy again; but this time the article just wouldn't run. Suddenly racing pigeons seemed the least important things in the world. She drifted off into reverie, time and again. What the dreams were, she couldn't say exactly; but there were jungles in them and hot brown plains, deserts and brilliant skies. She thought how marvelous it would be to tour the world; she'd always wanted to. There were real tigers still, and palaces and temples and gods and nymphs and dancing women, their fingers tinkling with bells. And saris and turbans and spice and dust and noise, and jewels and gold and mountains and dreams and blood. She'd go on again, then, on and on forever; and there'd be more islands, more seas, and palms and sand and sarongs, and flowers in the hair and singing, singing all the warm night long. She heard the voices and the music, and right inside her mind the swish and lap of waves. . . .

She stared, eyes wide, at nothing. Because there were more gods, very strange gods; gods that lived in caves, that swam like fish in the sea. And torchlight and firelight and chanting, and the brown girls laughing, pulling at her hands, gentle, strong. "*Come with us, Kaeti,*" they sang. "*Come. . . .*"

She pulled back. "I can't," she yelled. "I got an article ter finish. . . ."

She jerked awake and stared at the clock. She was appalled. Nearly half past two: she was supposed to be at the Town Hall already; she couldn't imagine what had got into her. She hauled her jeans on, desperate, and shoved her feet into her moccasins. No time to change; they'd just have to put up with it. She grabbed her jacket, bundled the papers into her briefcase, and fled.

Toby met her outside the office. He was standing with his camera already on his shoulder, peering anxiously down the road. "Where the hell have you been?" he said. "We should have been there a half an hour ago. . . ."

"Sorry," she said, for the second time that day. "I got 'eld up. Shall we take your car?"

He was staring at her. "What the devil's *that*?" he said.

"What's what?" she said. She looked down, and her heart gave another of those curious bounds. She was still wearing the tiger sweater; she'd forgotten all about it. "It'll be a'right," she said. "Tobe, are we takin' the car?"

"What?" he said. "Yes, we'll have to. For God's sake, get a move on, Kaeti. . . ." He broke into a half run.

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She pattered after him, down by the old works. He slung the camera onto the backseat of a somewhat battered Volvo, swung in, and started up. Kaeti jumped in beside him; he nosed into the street, headed for town center. "The Northern lot will be there, already, baying," he said. "They'll have our guts for garters. . . ." He swung left and swore. A crowd of sightseers had gathered outside the little Town Hall; political favors were much in evidence, and a scattering of hand-scrawled placards. Toby pulled in beside the steps. "Get in there," he said. "I shall have to dump this heap. Be with you as quick as I can."

Kaeti scurried up the steps, flashed her press card at a disinterested bobby, and pushed through the big doors. Inside, more folk were gathered in a crowd; she weaved between them and headed for the main hall. An official held the door for her; she stepped inside, puffing.

The Member was already well into his speech. Beside him on the dais sat old Standish and his wife, a portentous woman in an equally portentous hat. They were flanked by various assembled dignitaries: old Mr. Tom looking his most civic, the president of the Chamber of Trade, and half a dozen more. Kaeti began scribbling, though she already knew the speech by heart. Time of difficulty for us all, the need to pull together, great strides made by the party, invaluable support given by the town — though what that meant was anybody's guess. There were, of course, good things on the horizon; though it never seemed to get much closer. In the meantime, though. . . .

Kaeti wondered vaguely how you could tighten your belt and put your shoulder to the wheel at the same time. At least he left out the bit about noses to the grindstone; that really would have been too much. She scrawled the shorthand almost automatically, studying the Minister. He made a good front man; she granted that. Tall, hair still fair and wavy; he looked a lot younger than he really was. He'd kept his figure, too; while he always had been a snappy dresser.

He'd moved on to the new bit now, the ministerial appointment. Proud to serve his country dum-de-dum; new duties, of course, meant dah-de-dah. However, he renewed his pledges, whatever they might have been, to the town and to his constituents. They would always remain closest to his heart.

"Wonder where 'e keeps it?" muttered Kaeti. "Ain't in 'is chest, fer sure. Arse pocket, p'raps. . . ." She stopped then, startled; for the hot thrill had

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come again. Almost vibrating, as if the tiger had growled.

The Minister had had a hard day. First that new blowup with the EEC. There'd been a stormy cabinet meeting — he was wondering how long it would be before the press got hold of it; they'd already been sniffing round. Now the thing about the new NATO base was threatening to rear its head again; he'd only heard just as he was leaving town. He knew what he'd personally like to do with peace protestors, every man jack of 'em. Every woman, too, because the women were ten times the trouble. Knock one over the head and it was bad enough; drag one of the scruffy bitches a few yards by the hair, and you'd have every left-wing Galahad baying in chorus. He'd have liked to duck out of this bloody trip altogether; he'd had more than half a mind to — but there'd been rumblings in the town, his agent had been warning him for weeks. That was the trouble with constituents, though; they'd vote you in fast enough, then expect you to answer to them for every pettifogging thing instead of getting on with what really mattered. So he'd traveled down, got stuck in a bloody jam, and arrived half an hour late himself. Now the hall was too hot — he'd found himself more than once mopping his forehead — and there was still the blasted reception to come. Squawking of the constituency females; kowtows of the party workers, each one wanting to be noticed; the piranha shoal of reporters. Not that these hicks from the sticks weren't easy to deal with; after London, it was all small beer. He wiped his face again and wound up his punchline, though he was painfully aware he'd delivered it a dozen times before. If his secretary wrote "standing firm" again, he'd kick his arse; the bastard was getting lazier by the week.

Well, at least that was that part over with. Barrage of flashes from the cameras, firm applause from the dais, more muted response from the hall. Standish took over smoothly. Pledges of support; (how many did that make?) wish the Minister well in his new duties; mustn't keep him from them too long (polite laughter, a few close); will be delighted now to meet invited guests. And of course, the Ladies and Gentlemen of the Press. Or should it be Press Persons? More laughter; and the Minister sighed. At least, though, Bob Standish could be relied on. Still, that was only to be expected. He was a property developer, and all property developers spoke the same language. The Minister turned away and ducked through a little door at the back. Five minutes to himself, a quick pee — he'd been busting

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for the past half hour — then the delights of the mayor's parlor.

As ever, there were tables spread with plates of sandwiches; as ever, the constituency ladies operated tea urns and dealt out welcome slurps of gin and whiskey. The Minister circulated, smiling and nodding mechanically, fending off the barrage of questions as best he could. Normally that was second nature to him; but today seemed different somehow. The break had done him no good, no good at all; he wondered if he'd really had too much with his lunch. He was sweating again; his ears were buzzing, the many voices round him seeming to ring on a single insistent note. The smile was becoming more and more fixed; he was getting hoarse, too — he hoped it didn't show. Yes, the bypass was under review; a committee was examining alternative routes, in conjunction with proposals for the new motorway. Full integration of traffic systems was of course vital, in the national interest. It was the first he'd heard about a bloody bypass, as far as he could remember, but there must be a motorway somewhere close; he presumed it would be safe.

Sorry, what was that? Ah yes, the supermarket. Thank Christ the office had briefed him on that at least. Yes, naturally the matter was being closely watched. Whom by, he wasn't sure; he was glad nobody asked. Yes, if necessary he would intervene, act in the best interests of the town. But of course, in a free economy . . . free play of market forces, essential to the nation's wealth. . . . Freedom always the watchword of his party. . . .

"What freedom?" asked the strange young woman.

"I'm sorry?" he said. "I'm sorry?" His own voice sounded thick now, furry almost, as if there were felt pads over his ears.

"What freedom?" said Kaeti. "Freedom ter rip the guts out o' the place? Freedom ter make £2 million? You in on it as well as the bloody mayor?"

"Sorry," he said again. "Sorry. . . ." For some reason he couldn't take his eyes off her. The mane of hair, determined little chin; her own eyes that blazed now, shone like tawny lamps. "While you're buildin'," she said, "why can't you build some 'ouses? There's people bin 'ere all their lives, can't get a roof. An' what about the kids? The first-time buyers, livin' wi' their folks?" At first, Kaeti had been amazed by her own temerity; but now it seemed events were out of her control. Her voice seemed to be coming from a distance; and certainly she wasn't shaping the words. She was just saying them.

"House?" said the Minister. "Houses?" He swayed, seemed on the point

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of collapse, then collected himself with an effort. "The housing situation is under constant review," he said. "Yes, constant. Funds . . . funds have been allocated. . . ." He peered. It seemed he saw now not one pair of eyes but two. The second pair were far more terrible. They blazed, malignant; round them the details of the room were fading. The chairs and tables; draperies; the coats of arms and rolls of honor; the prattling, gabbing people — all were vanishing into a roaring, colored fog. Only the voice remained. " 'Ows that deal o' yourn goin'?" it said. "Settled yet, is it? Three-quarters of a million, wadn't it? By private treaty only. . . ."

The part of his mind that was still aware knew he had to attack. "She knows too much," it insisted. "She knows too much. . . ." He licked his lips. "Have you been down here long?" he croaked.

The girl began to laugh. Almost as if she knew what was coming. "Two years," she said.

"Tell me?" he whispered, "does your accent . . . does your accent hinder you?"

The laughter became louder. "No," she said. "Does yourn?" He reeled at that, would perhaps have struck out, but Standish had his arm. "Room, please," he said. "Make way there. No more questions, thank you. You can see the Minister's unwell. That's right, take his other arm. Room, please; room, make way. . . ."

"*Hazel eyes*," whispered Tina. "*Hazel eyes, tiger eyes*." She ran a finger gently across Kaeti's cheek. "*An' tiger nose. Littul tiger nose. . . .*"

"Leave it orf," said Kaeti, yawning. She rolled over and went back to sleep.

"Well," said Kerry, "you did a nice job yesterday, didn't you? How did you manage it, sticking pins in dolls?"

"Wha'?" said Kaeti blearily. "Wha'. . . ?" She peered at the handset, then the clock. It was only half past seven.

"The Minister," said Kerry. "Kaeti, where the hell's your story? I want it, fast. . . ."

"Can't," said Kaeti, swaying. "Wha' story? Wha's the time?" She'd forgotten she'd just looked.

The handset crackled.

"But you got it," said Kaeti, coming round a little. "You wadn't in; I left it wi' Rod. . . ."

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"The speech," yelled the black girl. Kaeti had never heard her really mad before. "I could have written that in my bloody sleep. *Where's the rest. . . ?*"

"There wadn't no rest," said Kaeti. "'E were all right. Jus' come over a bit faint. . . ."

Kerry was breathing through her nose like an overworked pony. "The Beeb have had it half the night," she said. "It'll catch all the earlies. Heart attack, in the car on the way back. He's in intensive care; don't know if he'll make it yet."

"Oh my Gawd," said Kaeti.

"Leave him out of it," snarled her editor. "Kaeti, *get down here.* Go back to bed, and I'll brain you. We're running a special feature; in case you'd forgotten, we go to press today. . . ."

"I can't," said Kaeti, still basically confused. "My court day. . . ."

For a moment she thought she'd lost her eardrum. "*Somebody else can cover,*" yelled her editor. "*Get a move on. . . .*"

"A'right," said Kaeti hastily. "A'right. Quick as I can. . . ." She put her head under the cold tap. Half an hour later she became conscious.

Kaeti trudged up the stairs to the flat. She let herself in, leaned for a moment with her back against the door, and rubbed her face. She pottered through to the kitchen and put the kettle on. She made herself a coffee, sat and stared at it, and smoked a fag. She could do without any more days like that. The office had been in uproar when she arrived. Rod was in, and Jan, Kerry's p/a. They'd even dragged Toby from his pit; the remarks he was making would have raised blisters on asbestos, but nobody was listening. Two of the girls from downstairs were making coffee; there were even a couple of comps buzzing about. It was going to cost an arm and a leg in overtime.

Kerry was on the phone. She'd got a cigarette stuck in the corner of her mouth; she didn't seem aware that it was there. Kaeti had never seen her smoke before. "Look, I don't care," she was saying. "Hold the lot. What? I don't know yet; we're still putting it together. What? Midday, if you're lucky. . . ." The phone squawked; but she cut the protestation short. "So what have you got that new gear for?" she said. "Try getting your fingers out. . . ."

She slammed the headset down. She'd evidently been talking to the

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print room. "Jan," she said, "get onto the hospital again. See if there's any change. No, somebody else; I want you free. You do it, Toby. . . ."

Rod hurried in. His hands were full of prints. More were already spread out on the desk. Kaeti, craning, saw they were Toby's shots from yesterday. Some were a bit wavy, as if they'd been dried too quickly.

Kerry grabbed the fresh pictures. "This all we got?" she said.

"All there was in the file," said the assistant editor, aggrieved.

"Which hospital?" said Toby.

"What?"

"Which hospital's he in?"

"Hammersmith," yelled Kerry. "For Christ's sake, look it up. . . ." She flung a directory at his head.

"It's all right," said Jan. "I've got it." But Kerry had already turned away. "Use the portrait," she said. "Crop it a bit. . . ." She turned the print over and scribbled rapidly on the back. She'd already done a layout; she grabbed the big pad and scribbled again. She marked Toby's prints A to D, and the phone went. "What?" she said. "No, I'm sorry, Mr. Tom. We don't know yet; we're working on it."

Toby was back. "No change," he said. "As well as can be expected."

"What the hell kept them?"

"Jammed switchboard," said the photographer laconically. He grabbed a cup of coffee from a passing tray and lit up, himself.

The black girl became aware of Kaeti. "And what the hell kept *you*?" she said. "You got your notes?"

"Yes," said Kaeti faintly. Things were still tending to whirl about a bit.

"Then get on with it," snapped Kerry. "Use the other office. . . ."

"There ain't no typer," said Kaeti.

"Put 'em on disk," yelled the other. "I haven't got time for hunt-and-peck. Go with her, Jan. . . ."

Kaeti marched out, stung to the quick. She slammed the door. The processor was already on. The redhead sat at the keyboard. Kaeti flicked open the cover of her notebook and did a double take. She still didn't know what had got into her yesterday; normally her shorthand was good. She began to decipher the squiggles, painfully. The copy on the screen began to scroll upward by slow degrees.

The door flew open. It was Kerry. "You finished yet?" she said. She peered. "So where's the rest?"

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"That's all I got," said Kaeti. She sat down and put her face in her hands.

"All you got?" said Kerry. "*All you got. . . ?*"

"Yeah," said Kaeti. "I . . . sorry. . . ."

The other took a breath; then suddenly she was quite changed. "All right," she said. "Don't worry; it's O.K." She called through the open door. "Coffee in here, please. Quick as you can. . . ." She sat down beside Kaeti and pulled her hands away. "It's all right," she said again. "Kaeti, what happened?"

"I dunno," said Kaeti miserably. "Things sort o' went blank."

The black girl bit her lip. "This isn't like you, Kaeti," she said. "There's something funny about it. Were you ill?"

"No," said Kaeti. "No, I . . . don't think so. . . ."

Kerry took her hands again. "You were in the mayor's parlor," she said. "With all the rest. The Minister was going round. He was talking, shaking hands with people. Can you remember anything? Anything at all?"

A girl came in. "Coffee," she said. She put down a tray of mugs.

"O.K., thanks," said Kerry. "Leave it there. . . ."

"Shakin' 'ands," said Kaeti. "Yeah, tha's right. 'E were shakin' 'ands." She looked up. "Tomlinson were there, Chamber o' Trade. Half a dozen more. I got 'em all somewhere. . . ."

"That's O.K.," said Kerry. "It doesn't matter now. We know who was there." She handed her one of the coffees.

Kaeti frowned. "They was askin' about the bypass," she said. "Yeah, tha's it. 'E said they was examinin' . . . tha's right, they was examinin' alternative routes. 'E said they 'ad ter be careful, though, cos o' the new motorway. . . ."

"What motorway?"

"I dunno," said Kaeti. "Struck me funny at the time. . . ."

"He was already ill," said Jan quietly. Her fingers were busy again, flickering at the keys.

Kerry glanced at her, vaguely surprised, and nodded. "Carry on," she said.

"Then 'e come over," said Kaeti. "No, I went to 'im. They was on about the supermarket. 'E din' want ter know, though. Said somethin' about free economy. Yeah, tha's it. 'Free play o' market forces. . . .''

The door was tapped. Rod put his head round apologetically. "Sorry," he said, "it's the comp room. They say, Do you want to run his cv? If you do, they've got it on disk. . . ."

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"The tiger tol' me, the tiger on me chest . . ."

"Only if he croaks," said Kerry heartlessly. "Get out, Rod." The door closed again silently.

She turned back to Kaeti. "Was there anything else, love?" she said. "Anything at all?"

"No," said Kaeti. "No, I don't think so. . . ." Her eyes widened suddenly. "I yelled at 'im," she whispered. "Called 'im a lot o' names. . . ."

Kerry shook her head. "You didn't," she said. "Toby said you were talking to him very nicely; he seemed quite taken with you. Then he just keeled over." She frowned. "There was one thing," she said. "You said something about a deal, for three quarters of a million pounds. Toby heard you; I don't think there was anybody else. Why did you say that, Kaeti?"

"Deal?" said Kaeti vaguely. "I dunno about no deal. . . ." Her face altered suddenly. "Why should 'e?" she snarled. "Buyin' a pad like that, an' not even on the manor. An' folks 'ere got no roofs. . . ."

Rod was back. "Sorry," he said again. "Courier's here. Only just managed to raise 'em. . . ."

"Tell him to wait," said Kerry. "We'll pay his time. I'll have some stuff for him soon." She raised her voice. "Tell him not to break any speed limits on the way," she said to the closing door. "It wastes time." She turned back. "Where did you hear that, Kaeti?" she said. "About the house he's buying?"

Kaeti looked up. Her eyes were glowing. "The tiger tol' me," she said. "The tiger on me chest. . . ."

The black girl looked at her for a moment. Then she gave a funny little smile. "All right," she said. "Take it easy; you've done well. Have a cig." Kaeti fumbled vaguely in her bag, and she produced a pack of her own. She said, "have one of these." She turned to the redhead. "Delete that last section, Jan," she said. "From 'free play of market forces.'"

The p/a's fingers became busy on the keys. The lines of copy vanished. "Is it right?" she said curiously.

Kerry nodded. "Yes," she said. "We've known for weeks. Even the nationals haven't got hold of it." She considered. "You haven't heard it either," she said.

"That's a'right," said the redhead. "Always did 'ave cloth ears. Drawback to me career. . . ."

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"I know the feeling," said Kerry. She walked away a pace and nodded to the typist. "*After a brief recess,*" she said, "*the Minister reappeared* in the mayor's parlor, to talk to the group of assembled guests and journalists. Advertiser *reporter Kaeti Fredericks noted that he seemed visibly unwell, and that he often paused to wipe his forehead. However, despite his obvious discomfort, he continued to perform his duties, giving assurances on the much vexed issue of the bypass and on the Fair trade supermarket proposal, which had recently caused so much disquiet. He was, in fact, in conversation with our representative when he collapsed; though what was at first taken as a simple fainting fit was unfortunately the symptom of a deep malaise. The editor and staff of the* Advertiser *unite in wishing the Minister, who during a distinguished career had given so much to this town, a speedy return to health. Copy ends. . . .*"

She turned back to Kaeti. "O.K., love?" she said. "Feeling better?"

Kaeti looked up. "I'm fine," she said, in quite a different voice. "It's just these early starts. Don't suit the system. . . ."

The black girl smiled again. "Well, early starts or not, you'd best get back home," she said. "You still don't look too good to me. . . ."

" 'Ome?" said Kaeti, appalled. " 'Ome?" She pointed indignantly. "Tha's my story," she said. "You jus' said so. Even got my name in. I wants ter see it put ter bed. . . ."

Kerry raised an eyebrow, then she shook her head. "You're a nutter," she said, "I always knew it. . . ." She touched Kaeti's hair lightly. "'Your tiger told you,'" she said. "I don't know. . . ."

Kaeti drained the coffee and stood up. She was wishing she'd taken the other's suggestion now. Not that it would have done any good; she'd have just mooched about and fretted. In any case, she wasn't ill; nothing you could put your finger on anyway. She just felt dull. Sort of drained. She'd been feeling like it all day.

They'd been ages late going to press. Everybody had been doing their nut, but Kerry had really got her teeth into the story; she'd hung on till the very last minute to see if there was any stop press. There hadn't been, though; the Minister was still, as they put it, holding his own. Not that he'd do much good now. She knew a bit about strokes and stuff; her uncle had had one, and he hadn't been all that much older. She supposed in a way the Minister had asked for it, all the mucking about he'd been doing.

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Not that she'd wished it on him; she wouldn't wish a thing like that on anybody. Something had, though; she was almost sure of it. Yesterday had been really queer.

She glanced toward the bedroom. She'd put the tiger sweater away, right at the back of the wardrobe. Hadn't even shown it to Tina. Which was funny; normally she'd have been the first. She didn't know why; she'd just felt somehow it would be wrong to. She shivered slightly, but that was because she was tired. There couldn't be any connection, of course. After all, it was only a woolly. Just a pretty woolly. She'd be getting superstitious next. Throwing salt over her shoulder, not walking under ladders. And don't put bread on the fire; it feeds the devil. Only, people didn't have open fires anymore, not now. Well, not many.

Come to think of it, though, she never had walked under ladders. Not since she could remember. But that wasn't superstition; that was just so you didn't get crowned with a pot.

She decided she was rambling. That was a sign of tiredness, too; it always happened. She walked through to the loo. "Get an early night," Toby had said when he dropped her. "You look as if you could use it. . . ." Maybe she would for once.

She put her chin in her hands. Tina wasn't back yet — but then, Kaeti hardly ever saw her these days; she probably wouldn't be in till midnight. Maybe not even then. Kaeti wondered what Tina was doing, which mob she was running with now. Kaeti hoped it wasn't that yob Frank and his mates. Came from up by Duckett's Cross; she didn't know anything else about him. Didn't particularly want to, either. She didn't even know his other name; she'd seen him only the odd couple of times, when she'd let Tina drag her down to Queens. She didn't like the place, never had. Jukebox blasting, and the counters all swilling beer. Wouldn't think they'd have places like that, not down here. She supposed they were getting everywhere, though. It was what the kids wanted. She never had, though, not particularly. Still she wasn't a kid anymore. Though come to think of it, neither was Teen. Just acted like one sometimes.

She didn't like the crowd that got in, either. Leather jackets, and bikes lined up in the front. Not that there was anything wrong with bikes. Step rode one, and wore leathers. That was in town, though, and town was different somehow. You still got honest crooks in London; out here you never knew where you were.

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She fell to thinking about Frank. Funny sort of face he had. Only in his early twenties; leastways that was what she guessed. But somehow he already looked old. Haggard, lines down his cheeks. She realized he'd probably never change, not till they planted him. She'd seen people like that before, though. Louts, they were called.

She reached behind her and pressed the handle. It was more an expression of opinion than anything else. She went back to brooding. He was jealous of her; that much was plain. But then, he was jealous of anybody who as much as looked at Teen. Like a big kid, really. But nasty with it. He didn't give a damn for Tina; except, she had to be there. She was useful for scrounging pound coins off, when he got into one of those shouting and yelling gambling games they played. He'd cleaned her purse out last time. Then got onto her because she wouldn't change a fiver, called her a mean old cow. Even then Tina hadn't done the obvious, told him to get knotted. Just sat and bit her lip and looked worried. "Be careful of 'im," she'd whispered. " 'E's ever so quick-tempered. 'E won't let nobody insult me, though; 'e's ever so good like that."

"I see," said Kaeti, tight-lipped herself. " 'E can, though."

Tina looked away. "Sort of," she admitted. "I don't let 'im go too far, though. . . ."

"Turn the bleedin' music up," yelled the Body Beautiful. "Can't 'ardly 'ear it. . . ." He balled a crisp packet and flung it over his shoulder. It landed on the table.

" 'Ere," said Tina indignantly. "Put it in the rubbish bin. . . ."

The aggressor turned. Kaeti thought she'd never seen a colder pair of eyes. Dead somehow. "I 'ave put it in the bleedin' rubbish bin," he snarled.

Kaeti sighed and eased her jeans off the rest of the way. For the life of her, she couldn't see what Tina saw in him. After all, she'd got twice his brains. And she'd got the flat. Nice flat, too, though it was a bit on the small side. Reckoned she'd wanted somewhere of her own for years, just to get away from her folks. Only she'd never had the chance, not till Kaeti advertised. Either the rent had been too high, or she hadn't liked the folks she'd have to share with; there'd always been something wrong. So why couldn't she be satisfied now? She'd said often enough it was all she'd ever wanted. Or at least take up with somebody who'd do her a bit of good. As for the other thing, the thing that had happened between them. Well, it had happened and that was that. She hadn't expected it; she certainly

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hadn't gone looking for it. She wasn't jealous; she'd never stand in Tina's way. Or try to. Not that she supposed it mattered much to the other. She was one of those that wanted their cake and eat it. Usually seemed to manage it, too. Kaeti sighed again. So many personalities, all clashing and conflicting; so many levels, in just one little town.

She pulled her shirt off and flung it at the laundry basket. She went through to the bedroom. A shower would have been the answer — she felt grubby all over — but she didn't have the energy. She felt if she didn't lie down, she'd fall down. She turned the light off, slid between the sheets, and closed her eyes.

"Go to bed." That was what somebody had told her. "Get to bed." She started thinking about the phrase. Sometimes, she realized, it meant the bed of a press; she'd even used it herself. Only, presses didn't have beds anymore; these days it was all rotary. Like the presses in the printshop. She saw the big drums spinning in her mind, slow at first, then gathering speed. *Whick-hiss, whick-hiss.* They'd still be running; they'd run a fair while yet. *Whick-hiss, whick-hiss, whick-hiss. . . .*

She opened her eyes. For a moment the darkness disoriented her; she'd thought it would be morning. Then she remembered. She pulled her arm from the covers, held her watch close to her eyes, and pressed the button that lit the little panel. Midnight. She'd slept for hours, then. She felt a lot better, though. Really wide awake. Which probably wasn't so good. Odds were, she'd be awake the rest of the night now.

There was a sound in the flat. Sort of a muffled bump. She'd thought something must have disturbed her. She sat up, frowning, and the light came on under the door. That was all right, then; it was Tina back. "Teen," she called, "that you?"

No answer. She lay back and closed her eyes again. Funny, but she always felt better when the other girl got home. Relieved somehow. She'd be through in a minute; she never messed about for long. Kaeti snuggled. "There's some milk in the fridge," she called sleepily. "An' put the light out this time. . . ."

Silence.

Kaeti sat up as if someone had jabbed her with a pin. "Tina?" she shouted. "Teen?" The yellow crack still showed under the door.

Her heart was hammering; she didn't know why. She flung herself out of bed and slapped the light on. She grabbed her dressing gown and ran

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through. Tina was sitting at the kitchen table, head down on her arms. "What is it, Teen?" she said. "What's the matter. . . ?" Kaeti grabbed her; the other groaned and tried to shove her away. Kaeti hauled her up by main force and shook, and it was as if the whole world stopped quite still. She saw the bruises on Tina's cheek and chin, the smears and smudges of blood on her neck and spattered across her shirt. "What 'appened?" Kaeti whispered. "What 'appened. . . ?"

The other tried to grin. "Run out o' change again," she said. "Tol' 'im like you reckoned. Din' work, though. Din' think it would, not with 'im. . . ."

Kaeti's ears were singing. She was tingling, too, tingling all over; yet she felt icy cold. She turned the ascot on and slopped water into the bowl. She flew into the bathroom and grabbed for cotton wool. The tingling was worse now, coming in great stabs and waves, as if it were she that had been beaten. She ran back and turned Tina to the light. She wiped her face and throat, then again and again, gentle, desperate. "Why?" she whispered. "Why, Tina, why?" She was no longer sure what she was asking, but it didn't matter, because the other didn't answer.

The mess had run inside her shirt as well. Kaeti unbuttoned, laid the fabric back across Tina's shoulders, and started again. The water in the bowl became brownish. She tipped it away and got more. "Where is 'e?" she said. "Where'd 'e go?" The rage was starting now. That flashed and stabbed as well.

"Wen' orf with 'is mates," mumbled Tina. "Party on. Last all night; they mostly do. Pity; it sounded good."

Kaeti rolled the other's lip back and winced. She wiped again, round under Tina's nose. She used the fresh swab carefully; she didn't want it to all start again. "You 'urt anywhere else?" she said. "Teen, tell me. . . ."

Tina tried to grin again. "I ain't 'urt at all," she said. "Jus' dented a bit. These things 'appen. . . ." Unexpectedly, she crumpled. "I adn't done nothin'," she said. "Don' mind if I starts it. But I adn't done a thing. . . ."

Kaeti had never seen her cry. Not properly. Never imagined it. It blotted out her hearing altogether. "Don't, Teen," she said. "It's a'right; don't. . . ." She cradled and rocked. "*Why?*" her mind kept saying. "Why, why, why. . . ?" This was where it all ended, you see. The laughing and joking, the good times, the couldn't care less: a hurt girl crying in a grotty little room, a plastic bowl with bloody water in it. And for what? Where was the reason? Where was the sense?

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The thoughts that came, she couldn't put readily into words. Somehow it was *them*; it was always *them*. She saw them clearly for the first time; they were faceless, yet still an entity. The ones who didn't care, the ones who'd never care; worse, the ones who'd never understand. The ones who smashed and tore, who broke things, stopped things, stopped good things, put bad things in their place. They'd break a life, and not think twice about it; pick a watch to pieces for the pretty jewels, and still not know the time. Yet beauty crawled to them, again and again, wanting abasement, wanting to be destroyed.... She thought how she'd like to be a tiger, a real tiger, running in the night. How she'd slash and tear then, slash and tear till there were none of them left: the people who hurt things, who hurt Tina, who hurt beauty. But what would beauty do then, poor thing? Put her head under her wing, poor thing? Or slash her wrists, for want of better immolation? For a moment she felt she really was a tiger; she lashed her tail and snarled.

But Tina was talking again, or whimpering. "What, Teen?" she said gently. "What is it?" She stroked Tina's hair. "What is it, Teen? You can tell me...."

It had been only ... well, temporary. The thing they'd had going. Temporary, till something better came along. No, she didn't mean better; she didn't mean that at all. Till something... something *else* came along, she had to understand. These things, they didn't last; they weren't supposed to last. They were ... well, you had to get married; you had to have kids. It wasn't supposed to go on; it was wrong for it to go on. So much to say, after all, so very much; but all in little flashes, hints, half syllables between crying, all that she could say.

Kaeti understood. She'd always understood, in a way. Love didn't last; it wasn't made to last. Any sort of love. What did the man say once? Show me a love story, and I'll show you a tragedy.... "It's all right, Teen," she said. "Don't cry no more; it ain't worth it. It's all right...."

Tina sat up unexpectedly and wiped her face. "Can I 'ave a drink?" she said. Her voice sounded funny somehow, sort of small and flat.

Kaeti hesitated. "It'll 'urt," she said.

The other glanced at her. "What don't?" she said listlessly. She lit a cigarette.

Kaeti got her a whiskey and cut it liberally. Tina swallowed in big gulps, then held the glass out. Kaeti refilled it, unprotesting. Something

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had happened between them then, some communication that, however vaguely understood, she knew instinctively would never come again. "Will you keep goin' with 'im?" she said.

Tina shrugged. " 'Spect so," she said.

"Will you marry 'im?"

"Dunno," said the other girl disinterestedly. " 'Spect so. If 'e asks me."

Kaeti lay and watched the ceiling, faintly visible now in the stealthily growing light. She wondered if that meant it was nearly dawn; she'd lost count of the hours she'd lain sleepless. She half stirred, then relaxed again. She felt too tired to look at her watch; it seemed after the anger, the dullness had returned. She felt defeated somehow, drained. She couldn't help Tina, and she couldn't help herself. This was the way it had to be, though; this was what life was all about. One day following the next, and doing your job, and not stepping out of line, not *trying* anything; not trying to change things, not trying to make them better, not trying to love. Because that way lay disaster; always, *they* were waiting. For just such a slip, just such a revelation of humanity.

She turned her head. It was funny, but the glow seemed brightest in the corner by the wardrobe. She could see the tall, dark bulk of it quite clearly, and Tina's head on the pillow next to hers; the great tousle of hair, pale curve of her cheek as she lay head turned. She moaned softly in her sleep.

Kaeti pushed the covers back and swung her legs out. Yet in the strangest way, she knew she hadn't moved. She lay and watched her own self turn and look down at Tina. She understood then. It was one of those dreams where you actually knew you were dreaming; she'd seen about it on the telly, only a week or two ago. If you tried hard, you could actually make different things happen. It didn't seem to work with this one, though.

She watched herself open the wardrobe and take out the tiger sweater. It was glowing, of course, as if it were on fire; that was where the light had been coming from all along. She put it on and worked her legs into her jeans. She picked her jacket up and made sure she had the keys. Both sets, for the house and the car. She eased open the door of the flat, tiptoed down the stairs, and let herself into the street.

The night was warm and full of scent. She knew what that was, though. The big tree behind the supermarket, the one they were going to cut down. Some sort of poplar, she couldn't remember which. There'd been let-

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ters about it in the paper, how it ought to be kept, how it wasn't doing any harm; then there'd been a lot more, about how it harbored greenfly, and rained sticky stuff on cars, and how it had to go anyway because it probably wasn't safe. But that was *them*, of course, seeing their chance again. She took a deep breath. The scent was heady, sexy almost; and it came only just for these few days. Somehow it reminded her of Tina. She supposed now it always would.

She crossed the High Street. No cars, nobody moving at all. The moon was sinking, throwing amber light on all the building fronts. "Good night fer tigers," whispered Kaeti.

She plunged into shadow: the little alleyway that ran beside the gents' outfitters on the cross. It was really dark there, pitch-black nearly; but she found she could still see. Beyond was a yard, with a little line of lockup garages. All brewery property; but then, most of town center was. The *Advertiser* was well in with them, but she'd still been lucky to get one for herself. She unlocked the door and swung it up. Inside squatted the little maroon Spitfire, her greatest pride and joy. She slipped into the driving seat and sat a moment smelling the sharp, sweet scent of PVC. Funny, because the Spit wasn't new — she'd done her fifty thousand; it had clicked up just as she'd driven in last time to park. But it seemed tonight her senses were unnaturally acute. She started up, feeling as ever the little rise of pleasure. The engine settled to a steady purr. Like a big, contented cat. She turned the headlights on. She didn't need them — she could see perfectly well without — but it was best not to call attention to herself. They cast white cusps on the walls to either side as she nosed into the street.

Tina moved, scrubbed restlessly at her face, and moaned again. "It's a'right, Teen," she whispered. "I shan't be long."

Funny how there was still nothing moving, and no lights showing anywhere. Usually there was the odd Panda car at least; they rumbled about all night trying to catch stray drunks. She knew there would be nothing, though; apart from her, the dream was empty for the moment.

She headed up past the Town Hall. The little car ran sweetly, as sweetly as she could remember. She changed down for the incline, swung left past the gold club for Duckett's Cross. Quite why, she wasn't sure. Except that somehow she felt drawn. She accelerated, taking the little car to seventy. The moon paced her, flickering behind trees. It was nearing the

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horizon now, growing stealthily larger, turning from amber to a smoky orange. She slowed for the bend by the Whitwell's farm, then realized she was wasting her time. Nothing would be coming, not just yet. She took the full width of the road and flashed beneath the farther stand of trees. She wondered what had made her have a thought like that. The road widened again and straightened. In the distance, a pale glimmer, was the signpost for Duckett's Cross.

On the near side was a bus stop, with a lay-by and a little shelter. It had been an old well house once. She pulled in. The hand brake made a little clicking sound. She turned off lights and engine and lay back. She stared at the moon. After a while other things seemed to recede. There was only the moon, pulsing slowly now. Sometimes it seemed far off; then it was as if she could reach out and touch it with her hand. "Good night fer tigers," she whispered again. This was the time they'd hunt, of course. She imagined one, bounding along. Pad and bound, pad and bound. . . . Its stripes were lovely, orange and black, the color of the moon and trees. She wasn't afraid of it; but then, she didn't have to be. Tigers wouldn't hurt you, not if you loved them. Not if you were one yourself.

The moon was lower now; she was almost sure she could see it going down. It was nearing the roof of the big house, the house set back from the road, behind its own stand of spindly trees. First, when the golden disk touched the gable, there'd be just a little bit cut out. Then there'd be half a moon, a quarter, then only just a little sliver left. She frowned. She was sure she'd been talking about the house to somebody: the gaunt house with its line of tall windows, staring dark like eyes. She couldn't remember who, though.

She turned her head sharply. It seemed her hearing was as acute as the rest of her senses. Miles away there was a sound. Fading in the little puffs of breeze, but always flowing back. An engine, coming steadily closer. Soon the humming would grow to a roar.

She opened the car door and stepped out. She took the jacket off and laid it on the driving seat. She walked into the road. Behind her, the windows of the house lit orange.

He kept the throttle wide, laying the big bike through the bends, enjoying the crackle of the exhaust. He accelerated into a straight, leaning the machine the other way. Not quite so far, though; he knew he'd nearly

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lost it a couple of miles back. Fuck that, though; he could handle bikes. What did a few beers matter?

He crouched lower, savoring the wind rush. Yes, he could handle bikes. Like he could handle fucking bitches like that Teen. Who the hell did she think she was, anyway? Coming the acid, with the likes of him. You showed 'em who was boss, right from the start. Not that he wasn't feeling a bit sorry. He supposed he needn't really have laid into her like that. He'd had a few, though; and anyway, she started it. Hard, he was, like his old man. Had to be. He'd really show her next time; that had been just a taster. Her and that London tart. Who did she think she was, coming down here, smart-arsing about? It was her that had started the trouble anyway; and he knew why. He knew what they were at, the pair of 'em. Well, that was going to finish as well. There was going to be some sorting out. Disgusting, that was what it was. All his mates reckoned the same.

Anger flared again at the thought. If you went with him, then that was it. You didn't piss about. Not with nobody.

He twisted the throttle. Ahead were the last of the trees, then the long straight to the village. Good for a ton that was, between here and the bus stop. He howled into the little copse. The trunks flashed past in front of the moon. Amber and black, amber and black. . . . He narrowed his eyes, glanced up, and tried to scream; but the sound was lost in the greater screaming of the machine. Tires, then the stridency of metal on macadam.

KAETI WAS feeling off-color again. Though, what with the night she'd had, it wasn't to be wondered at. First Tina coming home in a state like that, then the queer dream. It seemed to go on most of the night, which had been the last thing she'd needed. It had seemed very detailed; oddly enough, though, she could hardly remember a thing about it now. Except that she'd been driving her car. Where she'd been trying to get to, she had no idea, but it must have been important at the time. It had worried her a bit; she treasured the little Spitfire. She'd gone to the dressing table finally, to check; but the keys were where she always kept them. Both sets; and the logbook and the other bits and pieces with them. That was all right, then; she still felt a bit unsettled, though, somehow.

Tina was still asleep. Kaeti hesitated, then decided not to disturb her. The longer she was out, the better. And Kaeti could always come back midmorning, to see how she was.

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She thought about Tina on the way into town. The thing about love, and . . . well, the other word they had for it. It wasn't that, though; it wasn't that at all. It was all the rest: the silly things, the laughs they'd had together. Tina making popcorn, and forgetting to put the saucepan lid on; Tina experimenting with microwaving eggs. At least she'd found out the answer to that. Two muffled bangs, and the little glass door had become an uncommunicative yellow. But she'd had an answer to the popcorn saga as well. "You never tol' me," she'd said plaintively, when they'd scraped the last bits off the ceiling. "An' it never said on the packet. . . ." Kaeti caught herself half smiling; then she remembered Frank, and washing Tina's face. Her jaw set again.

She walked into the nick. Sergeant Smith was on. He looked up through the bandit screens and smiled. "Hello, Kaeti," he said. "Come through."

She trotted round. "Mornin', Sergeant," she said. "Anythin' for me?"

"Only the usual," said the policeman. "Attempted smash-and-grab at Dennington's; some fool put a brick through the window again. Didn't get anything, of course; the shutters were down, and it's all wired anyway."

Kaeti began to scribble. "Any leads?" she said.

The sergeant pulled a face. "Leads?" he said. "We could run in half a dozen layabouts. Choose the thickest in town; it'd be bound to be one of 'em. All swear they were somewhere else, of course." He turned a page. "Freeman and young Bill Tarleton had a punch-up outside the Dukes. Tarleton'll go down one o' these days if he don't watch it. Bloke done for speeding on the Northerton Road, shunt up at Gallows Hill. It's all down there."

Kaeti stared. "What's this?" she said.

He looked over her shoulder. "Bit of a funny one," he said. "Young bastard named Ellsworth. Bin askin' for it long enough. . . ."

A name seemed to jump out at Kaeti. Duckett's Cross. "Was 'is first name Frank?" she said.

"You got it there," said the policeman. "Yeah, look. There it is. Frank Ellsworth. Why, know 'im?"

"I might 'a' done," said Kaeti. "Was 'e. . . ."

The sergeant chuckled grimly. "Damn near," he said. "Hasn't come round properly, not yet. We got a man with him, though. Northerton General."

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Kaeti looked up quickly. "Man with 'im?" she said.

"Yeah," said the sergeant. "Told you it was a funny one. Remember that jeweler's in Northerton a week or two ago?"

"Yer don't mean—" said Kaeti

The other nodded. "Panniers half full o' the proceeds," he said. "All over the road, it was. Bloody young fool. He'll go down for a good old while, that's certain. Got form as long as your arm anyway. ABH, the lot."

"I could put some more ter that," thought Kaeti. Maybe she would. Tina wouldn't press charges, of course; she didn't care for the law. There must be some way they could get him, though; put his remission off a bit longer.

She scribbled again. She'd actually got an exclusive. Her very first. "Can I use this, Sarge?" she said.

"Don't see why not," said the policeman. "Everybody else will. Best check with the old man first, though."

Kaeti turned a page of her notebook. "Did 'e come round at all?" she said. "Did 'e say anythin'?"

The sergeant shook his head. "Not that made any sense," he said. "Full report's not in yet, but they reckoned 'e was raving about a tiger. Said a tiger went for him. Couldn't 'ardly hold him down in the ambulance, and 'im losin' blood by the bucket."

Kaeti was rooted to the spot. "A *tiger*?" she said faintly. "A *tiger*. . . ?"

"Yeah," said the other. "I ask you. A tiger, at Duckett's Cross. We 'aven't called the zoo, though. Say anything, they would, in a state like that. . . ."

"Thanks, Sarge," said Kaeti, suddenly recovering the power of her limbs. "Thanks a lot. Sorry, I gotta dash. . . ."

"See you," said the sergeant. "Mind how you go." He watched her retreat, with a little smile. He walked to the logbook. He stared at it a moment longer, with the faintest expression of puzzlement; then he shrugged. He closed it and turned away.

Kaeti danced with impatience. The phone box was occupied. The nymphet was rather nice, actually: curly brown hair, lots of it; a little beret perched on the back of her head; spectacular Technicolored slacks. But this was an emergency. Kaeti hammered on the glass; the nymphet regarded her coldly and turned her back.

Kaeti whipped the door open. "Sorry," she said. "Press. It's urgent. . . ."

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"Fuck orf," said the nymphet forthrightly. She turned away again.

Kaeti had an inspiration. "Sorry," she said, "gotta call the brigade. Town 'Alls on fire. . . ."

"Christ," said the nymphet. She left the phone dangling and took to her heels in the direction of the High Street.

Kerry was less than enthusiastic. Also she sounded really tired. "So?" she said when Kaeti had finished panting out her news.

"But it's an *exclusive*," said Kaeti. "We could syndicate it. Flog it to all the nationals. . . ."

"They'll have got it already," said her editor. "And we're a weekly, remember?"

Kaeti felt quite deflated. "Yeah," she said sadly. "Yeah, I esspect you're right. . . ."

"Don't worry," said Kerry in a slightly kinder voice. "I'll check it out, but don't expect a thing. Better come in, Kaeti. . . ."

"Right," said Kaeti. "On me way. . . ."

She had to pass the flat. She ran upstairs and hurried through to the bedroom. The clothes were flung back; she frowned at a brown smudge on the pillow. But there was no sign of Tina. It was a relief in a way. At least she wouldn't have to break the news to her just yet. She'd probably be cut up about it. Nothing like a good hiding, for fixing Teen's affections.

On impulse, she detoured to the garage. She unlocked and swung the door up. She didn't quite know what she expected to see; but there was nothing. The Spit stood as she had left it, gleaming and immaculate. "After all, it was on'y a dream," she said.

She got into the little car and sat a moment staring through the curved, deeply sloping screen. She glanced down at the dash, but everything was in order: her driving gloves in the little cubby, AA book on the other side.

Her eyes widened. She stared at the mileometer. She rubbed her face and tried again. The reading was still the same. Fifty thousand and eighteen. But it hadn't been. It had been fifty thousand dead, not even an extra tenth. She'd remarked it last time she parked.

Kaeti set her lip. She got out, shut the car door, and closed the garage. She set out for the office. She'd imagined it, or read it wrong; and that was the end of that.

Kerry wasn't there when she got in. Jan didn't seem to know a thing, and

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there was no sign of Rod. She rang Northerton General and got a non-committal response. She checked the phone book. There was one Ellsworth listed for Duckett's Cross. She called the number. The phone rang for a long while, but there was no reply. She'd hardly expected one. She rang her own number instead. Tina answered.

Her heart gave a little jump. "Teen," she said, " 'Ow are you? 'Ow do yer feel? Sorry I 'ad ter go out. . . ."

"A'right," said Tina. She sounded as listless as the night before.

" 'Ows yer face?" said Kaeti.

"Seen worse," said the phone laconically. " 'Ow's yourn?"

Kaeti bit her lip. "Sorry, Teen," she said, " 'Fraid I got a bit o' bad news for yer."

"Oh, Frank," said the other. "I know. 'Ad 'is ol' man on. Reckons 'e was framed, wanted ter know if I were mixed up in it. Threatenin' all sorts, 'e was."

Kaeti frowned. " 'Ow'd 'e get the number?"

"Dunno," said the phone. "Must 'a' give it Frank. An' 'e found it. . . ."

"Look," said Kaeti, "I'm comin' back. I'll be only a minute. . . ."

"Wouldn't bother," said Tina. "Goin' out, just got me coat on. See yer. . . ." The phone went dead.

Kaeti banged the desk. She half got up, then sat down again. If Tina was going out, then that was that. No use looking for her; no telling which of half a dozen scruffy dives she'd head for. And they were only the ones Kaeti knew about.

She got on with typing up the stories instead. Kerry came in as she was finishing. "Hello, Kaeti," she said. "Come on through." Kaeti rose and followed. She took the typed sheets with her.

The black girl was staring through the office window, back half turned. "Pull the chair up," she said. "Smoke if you like." It was nearly like the first time ever.

Kaeti lit up. She laid the copy on the desk, and the other walked across. She scanned the stories quickly, reading the Ellsworth piece twice. "Good try, Kaeti," she said. "Northerton got there first, though. The case had hotted up again; that old boy they banged over the head died last night. That'll be life for somebody." She rubbed her face. "There's your syndication from yesterday anyway," she said. There was a stack of nationals on the desk; she handed the top one across.

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"Yesterday?" said Kaeti vaguely, and the other smiled. "That's right," she said. "Yesterday's news is no news; we'll make a reporter of you yet."

"Oh," said Kaeti guiltily. "The Minister. . . ." The hectic night, and the events of the morning, had driven the whole thing from her mind. She glanced at a sentence ringed in red. *"Staff from the local newspaper reported the Minister had previously seemed unwell."* She frowned. "That all we get?"

"That's journalism," said Kerry. "What did you expect, a bunch of flowers?" She put the paper back on the stack. "Have you tried Northerton?"

"Yeah," said Kaeti. "'As well as can be expected,' that sort o' thing. Tried Tried Duckett's Cross as well. Nobody 'ome." She hesitated. " 'Is ol' man reckons it were a fit-up," she said.

"Bound to," said the black girl. "Yobboes of the world, unite. How did you find out?"

"Ellsworth's girlfriend," said Kaeti. " 'E 'ad a busy little night. Beat up on 'er first, then 'e went to a party. Esspect 'e was stoned out of 'is mind."

"You know this girlfriend well?"

"I sleep with 'er," said Kaeti bluntly.

If she'd expected a reaction, she didn't get it. "I see," said Kerry. "I didn't realize. How is she?"

"A'right," said Kaeti. "Right as she'll ever be. Till the next time."

"There won't be a next time," said the black girl. "Not with him, at least. Not for a fair while. Always assuming he pulls through, of course."

" 'E'll pull through," said Kaeti. "It's only the good die young. Anyway, if 'e didn't, she'd only find another. She always 'as."

"Yes," said Kerry. "I suppose she will." She stood up. "You look as if you could use a drink," she said. "And I wouldn't say no. All right?"

"Yeah," said Kaeti. "Yeah, fine. Ta. . . ."

She followed again. She'd expected the other would go out to one of the local pubs: the Wheatsheaf maybe, or the Royal. Instead, she walked through the outer office and opened the door at the side. She climbed the stairs that led to her private flat. Kaeti trotted after, wondering a little; she'd never been invited up before. Kerry opened a farther door, and Kaeti gasped. The place was bigger than she'd realized, with a spacious lounge carpeted in a lovely sage green. Tall windows looked out, like the windows of the office below, to trees and the red and cream tower of the church. In the middle of the ceiling hung a glass electrolier; it wasn't that,

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though, that stopped her in her tracks. It was the furniture. She knew nothing about furniture, nothing at all; it needed her dad for that. "Nice bit o' wood," he used to say, back in the old Market days. "Nice bit o' wood, girl; look at that. Come up a treat, that will. . . ." All she knew was that you sat on chairs and kipped in beds, but she was sure this was all antique. There was a sort of look to it. There were chairs with slender legs and curving backs, their seats upholstered with lovely stripy material; a long settee done in the same style; a little writing desk; and case on case of softly glittering glassware. She guessed that after dark it would spark and flash like diamonds. She ran to the nearest. "It's beautiful," she said.

Kerry half turned to her. Kaeti couldn't read her expression. "It's Waterford," Kerry said. "Some of it came from my mother, but I've been collecting for years. What did you expect, then — crossed spears and juju masks?"

"Don't be thick," said Kaeti with equal bluntness. "Yer know I ain't like that."

"No," said the black girl. "I'm sorry." Abruptly she started to cry. Kaeti hurried across, bewildered. Twice in twenty-four hours; she couldn't think what was happening. Must be something in the air. "Kerry," she said, "what's the matter? Wha' is it?" She held her, but the other recovered with equal speed. "I'm sorry," Kerry said again. "I get like this sometimes. Even me. . . ." She pushed away and brushed at her lashes. "Whiskey all right?" she said. "Bushmills, or Jamesons?"

"Ta," said Kaeti, "but could I 'ave the Paddy?" There were bottles and a decanter on a side table; she'd already seen the label, with its funny-colored map. "I prefers it," she said. "Yer can taste the peat better," she added apologetically.

The black girl smiled. "I always suspected you of having good taste," she said. "Now you can't deny it anymore." She poured slugs into two of the lovely crystal glasses. "You're all right, Kaeti," she said. "You'll always make out."

Suddenly Kaeti felt she knew just how to handle things. "You ain't so bad yerself," she said. "Fer a nignog, that is."

The smile became a grin. "You'll always be East End," said Kerry. "Take more than this lot down here to knock the corners off. I always knew I never should have hired you." She nodded to the sofa. "Sit down," she said. She lifted a little table across and set the glasses on it with the bottle between. She sat herself. She traced the outline of the map with her finger.

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"You don't like people at all, only the beautiful ones. The ones like you."

"The four fourths of Ireland," she said. "But did you know there are really five?"

Kaeti looked puzzled.

The black girl ticked off on her fingers. "Northwest, northeast, southeast, southwest," she said. "Connaught, Ulster, Leinster, Munster, and Where I Am. We're the fifth part, sitting here. It's a very old legend."

"Gosh," said Kaeti, "I din' know that. . . . Cheers," she added.

"Not many do," said the other. "Cheers." She thought for a moment, her hands between her knees, then she looked up. "I put my resignation in this morning," she said. "For some reason, I wanted you to be the first to know."

Kaeti was appalled. "But yer can't," she said. "Kerry, yer *can't*. There wouldn't be a paper, not without you. . . ."

"Of course there'd be a paper," said the other. "We're none of us indispensable. There's still a few about who'll be quite relieved."

But it wouldn't be the same. Worse, it was unthinkable. Just a boring little rag, printing boring little things. Who'd died, and who'd been born, and who expected to be; and who'd said what in the council, who was breeding which sort of fancy budgies. "Then I'm goin' as well," she said. "I shan't stop, neither. Not without you."

It seemed the other had read her thoughts, because she shook her head and smiled. But the smile was very sad. "You're not really what you said, are you?" she murmured. "You don't like people at all, only the beautiful ones. The ones like you."

"I ain't beautiful," said Kaeti indignantly. "I ain't even pretty. Me nose turns up an' . . . there's all sorts wrong. I should know," she said. "My mam dinned it inter me often enough. Brought up with it, I was. . . ."

Kerry chuckled, but somehow her eyes still had a far-off look. "You're also very easy to wind up," she said. "But I like you for it. You get wound up only about the proper things. . . ." She took a sip of whiskey. "Don't do it, Kaeti," she said. "There's no point, just for me. You made a good start, and you've come on well. Even getting the odd byline now and then. Give it another year, at least. Rod will be taking over, almost certainly; he'll see you all right."

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"I don' want ter give it *nothin'*," said Kaeti stubbornly. She drank whiskey herself and frowned. "Why'd yer do it, Kerry?" she said. "Why...?"

The other shrugged. "I don't know," she said. "Little things. Unimportant probably, most of them. You don't notice at first. But they build up. Till one day...." She sipped again. "It's like a brick wall," she said. "You don't know it's there; you don't know why it should be. But one day you run into it, full tilt. And you know that's the end; you've gone as far as you're going to."

"I know," said Kaeti suddenly. "It's *them*...."

"What?"

"Oh, I dunno," said Kaeti. "Somethin' I was thinkin' of the other night." She made shapes with her hands. "Things . . . break," she said. "Things, relationships, anything. No reason for it. It don't seem nothin' at the time; it probably ain't — but afterward.... It makes you see straight. An' you know yer can't go back. It ain't you didn' know before; it's just you didn' want to." She bit her knuckle. "When I was cleanin' Tina up," she said. "It wadn' much, reely, lookin' back. Looked worse than it was. 'Adn' even knocked any teeth out; yer see more than that in the papers any day.... I got mad," she said suddenly. "Thought it was at 'im. The bloke as done it. It wadn't, though. 'E ain't nothin', never will be. It was 'er...." She looked down at the carpet. "Should 'a' bin sorry for 'er. I thought I was. It wadn' that, though; it weren't nothin' like that. She'd let 'erself down. Me as well, in a funny sort o' way." She smiled apologetically. "Sorry," she said. "Don' suppose that makes much sense."

"It makes sense," said the black girl. Kerry considered again. "I had a boyfriend once," she said. "When I was very young. He had a fight over me. And won. I suppose I should have been flattered. I wasn't, though; I never went with him again." She brooded. "We're supposed to make the trouble," she said. "The women. Egg them on, that sort of thing. Maybe some of us do. Not in the main, though, not in the main. We just stand by to pick the bits up." She smiled bitterly. "We didn't make the Bomb, either," she said. "Though maybe we would have if we'd have the chance. You can never tell, with women. Specially nignogs."

Kaeti hesitated. She'd never seen the other in a mood like this. She probably hadn't exactly helped, either. She reached out, tentatively, to touch the black girl's arm. "Don't, Kerry," she said. "Don't. You're doin' yerself down." She swallowed. "I'm sorry fer what I said," she whispered. "It wadn't meant...."

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"I know," said Kerry. "That's why I didn't mind." She brightened suddenly. "Tip up, young Kaeti. You're getting slow in your old age."

Kaeti accepted the mood change eagerly. "But wha' about Mr. Tom?" she said. "Din' 'e stick up for yer? I thought 'e liked yer. . . ."

Kerry shook her head. "He was as mad as the rest," she said. "It was yesterday that really settled it, I suppose. 'Late on parade' was the term in general use." She twisted her mouth up oddly. "*This isn't Fleet Street,*" she said. "*This is a small country newspaper, serving the needs of the local community. . . .*" She brooded again. "He was right, of course," she said. "The one trap I warned you about; it was the first I fell into myself. But then, I always was good at telling other people what not to do."

"Goes fer us all," said Kaeti. She was thinking about Tina again. "Can't blame yerself fer that."

"No, I suppose not," said the black girl. "There's a bit more to it, though. Either you edit a paper or you don't. There's no half measures." She twined her fingers. "It's been the Minister all along, really," she said. "I wanted to run that story about the house purchase. That time we really would have scooped the nationals. But Mr. Tom put his foot down. That was what really started the rot. . . ."

Kaeti frowned. "Can't now, either," she said. "Not wi' the ol'geezer turnin' 'is toes up. Wouldn't be fair."

"No, I can't run it now," said Kerry. "There's some who would, but I'm not one of them." She turned. "Principles are funny things, aren't they?" she said. "The rows they cause are nearly always petty, but you still can't back down."

Kaeti drank whiskey. "So what'll you do, Kerry? Where'll you go?"

"Back to London," said the black girl. "Probably should never have left in the first place. Any more than you." She rubbed her face again tiredly. "I'm starting a small publishing company," she said. "Got a friend who's been wanting to have a go for years. You know the sort of thing. Slim, distinguished volumes; and no cash. But at least I shall be my own boss."

Kaeti looked hopeful. "Will you be needin' a secret'ry?" she said. She sniffed. "Gettin' too well known round 'ere anyway," she said. "Even bin joyridin' in my car. Unless it were the tiger," she added.

Kerry looked at her solemnly, then she began to laugh again. "I'll think about it," she said. "In the meantime, Kaeti, you and I are going to get genteely drunk. . . ."

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* * *

It was after four when Kaeti left, by which time she was no longer really in a mood for office work. She made her way back to the flat. Tina wasn't home, which she supposed was just as well; these days she was becoming more and more a liability. Kaeti hated the thought, but it had to be faced. She put her head under the cold tap and took a long, deep bath, by which time she was feeling fractionally more able to cope. Kerry had dropped a job on her as she was leaving, which in its way was typical as well. "That spiritualist thing at the theater tonight," she said. "Dave was going to cover, but he's copped out; I should have asked before. You needn't stay long. I want only a couple of hundred words; there's been enough about it already. Book a couple of hours overtime, though."

"That's a'right," Kaeti had said. "I don' mind. I'm a'right in the evenin's; it's just mornin' I 'as a job with."

"Yes," said the other dryly. "I had noticed. . . ."

Kaeti had a look in the fridge. They hadn't got a sight. But it didn't matter; she didn't fancy much anyway. She settled for boiled eggs and soldiers. At least there was some nice brown bread. She made herself a pot of coffee and sat and watched telly for a bit. She liked the little theater, always had. It was small, and tucked up behind the Town Hall, but it still had all the trimmings. A bar, even a little circle. The town's pride and joy, or so they claimed. Certainly the amateurs always packed it, whatever sort of junk they put on. But the odd times they'd tried London shows out there, they'd played to two rows of stalls. Some quite good names as well. If that didn't sum up the locals, nothing did.

The black girl had been right; there'd been too much waffle about this new thing anyway. Kaeti had thought so all along, though it hadn't been her place to say so. It had really been Kerry's own fault, running all that stuff in the letter columns; Kaeti would have pitched it in the bin herself. It had been rumbling on for three or four weeks, ever since the booking had been announced, though she supposed it had made a change from complaints about the siting of bottle banks. First the local vicars had weighed in. Raising evil spirits, stuff like that. She didn't think they'd any of them done themselves much good. All that medieval gear, she wouldn't have believed it. Good promotion for the show as well, if they'd only had the sense to see it. Like getting a book banned, people'd go crazy for

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black-market copies. Then the other lot had weighed in; it was all "give it a chance," and "don't prejudge," and "keep an open mind." "My auntie was a spiritualist," snarled Kaeti. "She 'ealed our bleedin' Peke. . . ." For herself, she had a completely open mind. Mediums, tea-leaf readers, the boys in town who worked the Three Card Trick — she never judged any of them. Though if anything, she favoured the Three Card merchants. Front man to get the punters hooked, scouts either side so they could scarper if the law turned up — it was all dead professional. She was still surprised people kept falling for it, though. She supposed there was always a new generation of suckers.

The show wasn't for another hour, but she thought she'd best get round. The bar would be open. She was bound to know one or two people there; she might pick up some bits. There'd been a lot of muttering about the show being booked without the full consent of the committee; she supposed there'd been some palm greasing going on, or maybe somebody had just had a rush of power to the head. She put her jacket on, slung her bag on her shoulder, and hurried downstairs. She headed up toward the High Street. She'd been tempted to wear the tiger sweater, decided against it at the last minute, and settled for an ordinary T-shirt. She didn't want to call attention to herself, not when she was on a job. Besides, it had caused enough trouble last time.

When she arrived, there were already people milling about outside, and a morose-looking young man in a mac was handing out leaflets. She took one, said "Ta" absently, and stuffed it in her bag. She supposed it was something to do with the show. She flashed her press card, but it cut no ice: they'd got the place sewn up; they were doing front of house as well. She gritted her teeth, paid her four-fifty with the rest, and got a seat at the back. She was surprised to see the place was nearly sold out; she hadn't realized there were so many local nutters. She stuck the ticket in her pocket and went through to the bar. The first person she saw was Toby. He was leaning in the corner, wrapping himself round a biggish-looking gin. "What you doin' 'ere?" she said. "You official?" She hadn't thought Kerry would want any photos, not after what she'd said.

He made an exaggerated shushing motion. "Happens to be a personal interest of mine," he said. "Never mock faith, young lady; still waters run deep." He struck a pose. "There are more things in heaven and earth," he said, "than are dreamed of in your philosophy, Kaeti."

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"Leave it orf," she said. He winked at her.

Tony was running the bar. He'd been doing front of house last time she'd covered a show. That had been for the Players, though. They weren't a bad bunch; best of the boiling, she thought. " 'Ello, Tone," she said.

He pushed an enormous-looking whiskey across. "On the house," he said. "Evening, Kaeti."

"No, thanks," said Kaeti. "Not reely. I . . . ta. . . ." At this rate she'd be smashed again before the curtain went up.

The barman for the night leaned across. "You seen Madame Zara before?" he said.

Kaeti shook her head. "No," she said. " 'Eard of 'er, somewhere or other. . . ."

The other was looking grim. Unnaturally so, for him. "She's been working the district," he said. "Time she was run out on a rail. Glad to see you here, Kaeti. Give her some stick."

Kaeti looked suitably shocked. "What?" she said. "I can' do that. Tryin' ter subvert the press, whatever next? Objective reportin', that's what I do."

The barman nodded. "I'll settle for that," he said.

The place was getting really full. Half the town seemed to be here. She saw some more from the Players, even one or two of the Operatic. They'd have come only to keep tabs, though; they didn't like the idea of anybody else using their theater. She'd heard they'd even had a hand in stopping the London bookings. She'd have to have a go at them sometime, try and get one of them to say something daft. Then she remembered she wasn't going to be around much longer. So it really didn't matter anymore.

Her shoulder was being shaken. She turned. A diminutive vision in white. Hair piled up, the lot. "It *wadn't*," she said fiercely.

"Wadn't what?" said Kaeti, adrift.

"The Town 'All," said the vision. "It wadn't on fire at all. . . ." She clenched her fist. "I ought to 'ang one on you," she said.

Kaeti recognized, belately, the nymphet of the morning. "Sorry," she said, gulping. "It were all a mistake. . . ."

"Yeah," said the nymphet. "You made it. . . ."

"Look," said Kaeti hastily. "You have a drink? I'm sure we can sort it out. . . ."

"G and T," said the small girl, seemingly mollified on the instant. "His is a fruit juice." She indicated a tall, nervous-looking lad. "Drivin'," she explained.

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"What you come for anyway?" said Kaeti. She was juggling with glasses, trying to pay at the same time. "You inter this sort o' thing?"

"Nah," said the nymphet. "Jus' thought it might be a laugh."

"Well, you watch it," said Kaeti. "Don' believe everythin' you 'ear."

"Yeah," said the other. "I found that out this mornin'. Cheers. . . ." She vanished as abruptly as she had appeared.

"Ah, Kaeti," said a tall, military-looking gentleman. "Have a drink, m'dear. . . ."

"No, ta," said Kaeti. She hadn't the faintest idea who he was. "I got plenty. . . . "

"Tony," bellowed the military-looking gentleman. "Drink for the young lady, chop-chop. Dyin' o' thirst. . . ."

"No, please," said Kaeti again. "Honest. . . ." That time it came out more as a bleat. The whiskey had already arrived, though. It looked even bigger than the last. She began to wonder, seriously, if she'd last the course.

"Don't tell me you believe this sort of twaddle, then," said the gentleman. "Or are you hah for the papah? All right, Susie, comin'. . . ." He weaved his way back through the crush. At least it saved Kaeti the bother of answering.

Toby was looking at his watch. "Best get in," he said. "They'll be starting in a minute."

"You go on," said Kaeti nastily. "Yore the one wi' the special interest." She followed him anyway, still slurping scotch. She dumped the glass by a stand of potted palms and joined the crush entering the hall. She found her seat finally and sat back with a gasp. Her ears were buzzing slightly, but that was only to be expected. She'd probably be all right by the interval, though.

She looked round her. It seemed the curtain wasn't going to go up at all, because there was a woman sitting on the stage. She supposed it was Madame Zara. She wore a long black dress, and black scarf that covered her hair. They'd focused a single red spotlight on her; it turned her face into a featureless blob. "Fetchin'," muttered Kaeti. She felt in her bag for cigarettes, then remembered it was No Smoking. But her fingers had touched a paper. She pulled it out curiously. The thing she'd been given outside.

She angled it to catch the light. It wasn't to do with the show, after all. Some sort of Jesus club, as far as she could make out. It listed all the things

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she mustn't do if she wanted to get to heaven. She saw they'd put Buddhism alongside spoon bending. "Nice one," she said. That was the trouble, though, when this sort of thing got started. The people who opposed it were the nuttiest of the lot. She wondered what they'd reckon to people turning into tigers. But they didn't seem to have thought of that at all.

The hall lights were going down; she stuffed the paper away and tried to concentrate. An urbane-looking bloke had appeared on the stage. He was carrying a microphone. "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen," he boomed in portentous Oxbridge. "I am John Porterton-Coleridge. Madame Zara has asked me to welcome you all. She has asked me to say how pleased she is to see so many friends here tonight."

"I bet she is," muttered Kaeti. She'd already done the sum, at four fifty a nob.

"*Shhh*," said somebody behind her.

The compere, whoever he was, went smoothly into his act. "There may be some of you here," he said, "unused to these proceedings. Or to those wonderful skills grouped so loosely and unkindly under the meaningless title 'spiritualism.' Madame Zara wishes to assure you that tonight you will see nothing of the so-called occult. Quite the contrary, because Madame Zara herself is the most ordinary of persons. In fact, beneath those rather somber wrappings, she is — ahem — a very lovely lady."

"Believe that when I see it," thought Kaeti.

"What you will witness instead," went on the actor. (Kaeti was sure now he was an actor; she was certain she'd seen his name up somewhere or other. It had been a long time ago, though.) "What you will witness instead is a demonstration of phenomena so natural, and in my view so beautiful, that you will wonder why, if ever, you felt cause to fear them. . . ."

A little nervous laughter, and a scattering of applause.

"Yes, fear them," cried John Porterton-Coleridge. "We propose to dispel that fear, to brush away, as it were, the cobwebs of ignorance and superstition."

"Christ almighty," thought Kaeti. She sat transfixed. The military-looking gentleman had been right; she'd never heard so much twaddle in all her born days. But the audience seemed rapt.

The compere was well into his stride now. Meaning of the black drapes, reason for the red light. "Some unkindly souls," he said, "some unfriendly spirits, have sought to accuse us of—" He lowered his voice

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conspiratorially. "—of *showmanship*. Yes, friends, difficult as it will be to believe . . . *showmanship*. . . ." He uttered the word as if it were the vilest ever to pass the lips of man.

It wasn't showmanship, of course. The phrase "transfiguration medium" was a new one on Kaeti, but she caught on fast enough. The red spot, which effectively blotted out her features anyway, made it easier for the old trout — she begged her pardon, Madame Zara — to assume the appearance of the Dear Departed. No, that was wrong. "Those Who Have Passed Over." She fiddled surreptitiously in her bag and found her notebook. "Those Who Have Passed Over," she wrote. It seemed she was rapidly acquiring a new vocabulary.

John Porterton-Coleridge was winding up his pitch. "I," he said, "am a mere voice, a humble admirer of those gifts that Madame Zara will now demonstrate, and that she will be pleased to discuss with you, face-to-face, when our little session is over." He stepped back. "And so, friends, I present the third member of our little team, William Holdsworth." He smiled. "Though he prefers his friends simply to call him Bill."

It was to be a double act, then. Kaeti hadn't realized.

"Bill," said Mr. Porterton-Coleridge, "is our Sensitive. It is he who will receive the messages from those Loved Ones — Those Who Have Passed Over — that I know you are now waiting eagerly to hear. Friends, I leave you in the capable hands of Bill; and of course, of Madame Zara." He bowed and left the stage. This time the applause was firm and unrestrained.

"They can't all be round the twist," thought Kaeti baffled.

William Holdsworth — his friends called him Bill — was a small, brown-suited man, balding and possessed, it seemed, of limitless energy. Leastways he immediately began bounding about the stage with something of the frenetic enthusiasm of a grasshopper. "Or a flea on a plate," thought Kaeti. He picked on the prompt side first. "There's something coming," he said. "No, it's gone again. Wait. . . ." He clasped his forehead. "There's a name," he said. "Yes, I hear a name. Arthur. Someone down there . . . Arthur, recently Passed Over. Arthur. Does the name Arthur mean anything to you? No?" He laughed. "So difficult sometimes," he said. "So difficult. Even spirits can be wayward. I'm sure it's Arthur; Arthur wants to speak. Or is it Joe? It may be Joe. Joe, anyone? No takers? Well, then, no Joe. . . ."

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Kaeti sat back, amazed. The spiel was lousy. Her dad would have done better with one arm tied behind his back — and he'd only been flogging fruit and veg.

Mr. Holdsworth laughed again. "Well, it sometimes doesn't work at once," he said. "So very embarrassing; it's probably just me. I'm still receiving, though. Let's try over here. Harry? No? Concentrate, friends, concentrate. Help Those Who Have Passed Over to speak. They're there, friends, they're there. . . . Help them to come across. . . ."

He got a bite on his fifth or sixth attempt. "Albert," he cried triumphantly. "Albert, perhaps it was Albert calling, I misheard. Albert? Albert, anybody? Yes?"

There was an indistinct muttering halfway down the hall. Mr. Holdsworth shaded his eyes. "I can't see," he said. "Yes, you, sir. The gentleman in the blue suit. Albert. Your father . . . no, your brother; silly of me. . . . Please stand up, sir; let's all see you better. . . . He wants to say . . . he wants to say . . . yes, it's coming . . . he wants to say he's very happy Over There."

"Well, 'e never were down 'ere," said an elderly, stocky man. "Right misery 'e were, right from when 'e were a kid. . . ."

Madame Zara moaned loudly and began to rock from side to side. "He's here," said Mr. Holdsworth in a hushed voice. "He's here. . . . Your name, sir, please. . . ."

"Joe," said the elderly man uncomfortably.

"Joe," cried Madame Zara in a sepulchral voice. "Joe, come forward. Come to the front. . . ." She held her arms out appealingly. "Come to me, Joe," she begged. The old man shuffled forward; Kaeti began to titter.

"Joe," said Madame Zara, "it is never true. . . ." She was using a sort of crab apple voice now, and hunching up; Kaeti supposed it was to make her seem old. Her acting was lousy as well. "That face I presented to you, Joe," she said. "That face that I presented to the world. It was a false face, Joe. Because I could never show the love I had inside me. Listen, Joe," she said. "I'm happy. Happier than I would have believed. I want you to share that happiness with me, Joe, to share it with us all. Will you promise, Joe?"

"Well, I dunno," said the elderly man. "Can't see as 'ow I can. . . ."

"It's important to us, Joe," said Madame Zara. "To all of us Over Here. Will you try, Joe, for me? Will you promise?"

"Well, I dunno," said the elderly man again. "I'll do me best," he said unwillingly.

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There was a burst of applause.

An hour later, Kaeti felt more like screaming. Once started, the flow of victims seemed endless. They were shouting now from all over the hall, each clamoring to be next. Madame Zara had been a Trudy and a Mavis, a Gerald and a Benny and a Jim. She'd seen a weeping woman led away after contact with her sister; she'd seen, with a species of cold shock, a fair-haired girl hold the hands of her little boy, killed in a horrendous crash. And Mr. Holdsworth was capering more wildly that ever. "Fred," he shouted. "I hear the name of Fred. Answer, someone. Fred. . . ."

Kaeti didn't know what had come over her. Maybe it was the booze. "Tha' my ol' man's cousin," she said.

Mr. Holdsworth peered again. "The young lady," he said. "The lovely young lady in the jeans. Your name, my dear?"

"Kaeti. Spelled with an 'ae.' "

Madame Zara burst into deep laughter. "Kaeti, Kaeti," she said, "as if I could forget. . . ." She leaned to Mr. Holdsworth and spoke behind her hand. He bent to catch the whisper.

"He was a contented man for most of his life," he said. "Then he knew a time of great sorrow, but later he found more peace. Am I correct?"

"Yeah," said Kaeti, " 'E went through a bit of a patch."

Madame Zara held her arms out. It seemed to be her favorite gesture. "Come to me, Kaeti," she said. "Come to the front, my dear. Come closer to me." She was using the deep, rich voice again.

Kaeti did as she was told.

The medium peered down at her. "Kaeti, my dear," she said, "how you've grown. Yet when I knew you, you were no more than a child. How long has it been, my dear? Eight years? Ten?"

"Three an' a bit, actually," said Kaeti.

Madame Zara pressed her hand to her forehead. "Forgive me, Kaeti," she said. "Our memories fail us here. Because here, you see, there is no Time. . . ." She leaned forward again. "How is the family?" she said. "How are your dear father and mama?"

"A'right," said Kaeti. "Dad gets a bit o' trouble with 'is 'ip. . . ."

"I knew it,' boomed the medium. "The times I told him, Kaeti, but he would never listen. . . . Does he still work at the same place, Kaeti? The brewery, wasn't it?"

Kaeti licked her lips. " 'Ow did you know?" she whispered, transfixed.

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The jolly laugh came again. "I do remember certain things, my child," said Madame Zara. "I remember a great deal. I remember the present I gave you, Kaeti. The big present that you wanted so much. Do you remember?"

"Yes," whisphered Kaeti.

Madame Zara prompted gently. "At Christmas, wasn't it?"

"Yes. . . ."

"And what was it? Tell our good friends here. . . ."

"A bicycle," said Kaeti in a very little voice.

Louder, me dear. So all our friends can hear. . . ."

"A bicycle. . . ."

"And how old would you have been, my child? How old were you then?"

Kaeti seemed to be finding it difficult to speak. She moistened her lips again. "Twelve," she said. The murmur was barely audible; the audience sighed and wiped its collective eyes.

"Do not fear, my child," said Madame Zara. She bent even lower. "Do not fear. Come, take my hands. . . ."

Kaeti exploded. "Fear?" she yelled. "Fear? 'Ood be scared o' you? You silly ol' bag," she snarled. "Yer can't even *act*. . . ."

Madame Zara started back, appalled. Mr. Holdsworth froze in his pirouettings. Hubbub in the hall. Kaeti's voice rose above it. "Fred Tranter," she yelled, "were the meanest ol' bastard God ever put breath in. 'E never give nobody nothin', not in 'is 'ole life. Wouldn't give yer 'ead cold, not if 'e'd get one ter spare. 'Is old lady slung 'im out fer 'is drinking. That was 'is time o' sorrow. Walked under a bus in Stepney, 'e did, pissed out of 'is skull. That were 'ow 'e found peace. . . ." She flung her arm out. "An' what's all that bleedin' yo-ho-ho for? 'E'd got a voice like a parrot wi' croup. . . ."

Madame Zara was on her feet and towering. "*I sense an unfriendly spirit*," she boomed in a doom-laden voice. "*I sense an unfriendly spirit*. . . ."

Hands were already grabbing for Kaeti. She shoved them away. Too bleedin' right yer do," she shouted. "Don't need no crystal ball fer that. . . ." Her chest heaved. "You rotten ol' cow," she screeched. "Takin' all these people in, battenin' on 'em. . . . You orter be 'ung," she raved. "The ol' pack on yer. I'd bring it back in special. . . ." She shoved the people away again and turned to face the audience. "An' you," she yelled, beside herself at last. "You pack o' flamin' dead'eads. Need yer arses kickin', the 'ole lot on yer. Believin' all that garbage. . . ."

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A flash went off in the hall. It partly dazzled her. It could be only one person. She wondered with a part of her mind how the hell Toby had smuggled the camera in.

"*Expel that girl,*" boomed Madame Zara in an even more dreadful voice. "*She is not one of us. . . .*" The flash went off again. "And get that sodding camera," she squawked.

"Watch it, Tobe," yelled Kaeti. She'd located him now, more or less. She started to work toward him, still fighting off arms and fists. The flash came again, this time from the side. He was making for the middle exit door, then. She changed course, but she was still impeded. A large woman confronted her; Kaeti let fly, and the woman sagged backward with a grunt. She landed in one of the front-row seats; its arms splayed outward instantly, as if in supplication.

"Get the 'ouselights on," croaked Mr. Holdsworth. John Porterton-Coleridge augmented him from somewhere at the back, in best Shakespearian tones. "*Let there be light,*" he boomed. "*Friends, let there be light . . . .*" But it seemed for the moment nobody could find the switch.

Kaeti glimpsed Toby. He was vanishing slowly under a thrashing heap of bodies. "'Ang on," she yelled, "I'm with yer. . . ." She head-butted a punter and lashed out at another's shins. Then she was close, but there was one who was faster. A flash of white, and the nymphet launched herself at the melee. She landed on somebody's shoulders and started whirling a brolly round her head. "Come on, Rich," she yelled, apparently to her escort, "get stuck in. Earn yer bleedin' keep. . . ." She laid about her vigorously. The scrum faltered and collapsed.

Kaeti tripped and almost measured her length. She hauled a small man out of the way by main force, then glimpsed Toby again. He'd still got the camera; somebody was trying to stamp on his fingers. She whirled her bag in emulation. A good healthy crack, and the aggressor subsided. She was puzzled for a minute, then she remembered the shell case she'd bought in the old junk shop in the High Street. She'd thought it might polish up for a spillholder or something; she'd been meaning to take it out for days.

A whirlwind of energy passed her. The tall young man, it seemed, was nervous only under certain social circumstances. Bodies flew liberally about; the nymphet swung the brolly again for good measure. "Watch it," panted Kaeti. "We're on the same bleedin' side. . . ."

Somebody was bleating for the police. It was too late, though; they'd

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already reached the door. Kaeti shoved, and there was a welcome gust of cool night air. "You all right, Tobe?" she said. "Come on. . . ." She fled; the others followed at her heels.

They pulled up a couple of streets away. Toby was puffing violently; Kaeti was a bit blown herself. Only the nymphet seemed unaffected. Her hair had come partially undone; she shook it the rest of the way. "Put yer tie straight, Rich," she snarled at her boyfriend. "Yer look a bleedin' fright. . . ." She turned to Kaeti. "Wot you got in that bag?" she demanded.

Kaeti showed her. "I forgot ter take it out," she said.

The nymphet's eyes widened. "Nice one," she said. "But it orf yer. . . . Got a comb? I left me 'andbag somewhere," she explained.

Kaeti leaned against the wall. "Well, we've 'ad it now," she said. "That's all us fer the slammer. . . ."

"Come orf it," said the nymphet. She cocked an ear. "Nobody comin' arter us," she said. "Wadn't nobody there knew us anyway."

"Speak fer yerself," groaned Kaeti. It was true, though; she'd hardly known a soul. Only the Players and the Operatic. And they wouldn't split. They'd all wanted her to give the show a knock, but she'd gone one better. She'd closed it.

The nymphet finished fiddling with her hair. "Right," she said briskly. "Come on. . . ."

Kaeti followed, still a little dazed. She turned a corner, and there was a most unsalubrious-looking boozer. The nymphet marched in. Kaeti followed again, to be greeted by an atmosphere of rock music and smoke. Behind the bar was a saturnine-looking young man with a Mohegan hairdo in pink and green. Kaeti recoiled faintly, but the nymphet was undeterred. "This is Ed," she announced to the world at large. "Mate o' mine." She perched on a barstool. "We bin 'ere since seven, Ed," she said. "Right?"

The Mohegan evinced no surprise. "Yeah," he said. "Noticed the clock as yer come in."

"You worries too much," said the nymphet to Kaeti. "What's everybody 'avin?" She jerked her thumb at the long-suffering and so far silent Rich. "'E'll pay," she said.

Kaeti lay on her back and felt the bed tilt slowly from side to side. She opened her eyes and stared into blackness, a blackness that somehow seemed more than physical. She'd known it was coming; she'd felt the

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reaction setting in. Even at the pub, with all the noise and talk. Her and Toby, Rich, the nymphet. They couldn't help her, though; they were getting shadowy even then. The depression isolated her, cut her off, like shooting anesthetic round a tooth. Because all parties end; all good times end; always there's an empty flat waiting, an empty bed, a dark and silent room. She'd lived for three days from one high to the next; now the piper must be paid. Or the ferryman. She wanted, in an access of bitterness, to slip a gold coin under her tongue. Charon could come then in the night, pole her away to where there was no more laughter, no more light. Just darkness, cold, the silence that lasts forever. And she'd never be hurt again.

She'd been fooling all along. She'd even convinced herself, for a minute or two, that the nymphet was right, there wouldn't be a comeback. There'd be a bill, though, for the night's festivities, and it would be paid in court. All right for the nymphet — she was like Tina; it was all a laugh. But for Kaeti?

She groaned. Hadn't she started to grow up, even now? Hadn't she learned an atom of sense? She could see the headlines already; Northerton would love them. *"Local reporter disrupts séance." "Kaeti's Kapers." "Acting as the spirit moved her. . . ."* It was the sort of story she'd have liked to get her teeth into herself. But she'd given it to everybody else.

So she'd been drunk. She was drunk now. What sort of excuse was that? She'd let herself be wound up again. Kerry had warned her that very afternoon, how easy it was to do. But had she listened? Did she ever listen to anything?

Well, at least that was her future solved. All fine and noble and cool, that was how she'd planned it. She'd seen herself strolling into the office, quietly giving her resignation to Mr. Tom. Instead, she'd be like something the cat had dragged in, come for her cards. "Industrial misdemeanor" — that was what they'd call it. Or something of the sort. It would mean there'd be no month in lieu, no compensation. No dole either; she'd have to kick her heels for the first six weeks. She'd be like a kid in school, having her knuckles rapped for pinching chalk. That wasn't the worst of it, though; that was just a part. She'd realized that in just three days she'd lost everything. Her job, Kerry and Jan, Toby, Rod — the lot. She'd lost Tina.

There was a stab at that, nearly too painful to be borne. She realized

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she'd been lying all the while: lying to Tina, lying to herself. All the goody-goody talk, the tickings-off for going with the wrong sort of blokes. She didn't want to change Tina; she never had. She hadn't cared whom Tina went with, what she did, as long as she came back. She wouldn't come back now, though. Not anymore. Why should she? Her life was her own; if she chose to make a mess of it, it was nobody else's concern. And Kaeti was hardly one to talk. She'd wouldn't have put up with it herself, not for a minute. She'd have walked out, ages back: packed her things, stuffed the keys through the letter box, and vanished. Instead . . . well, "instead" was over now. She'd lost, all the way down the line, lost everything she'd ever really wanted. She realized just how patient Tina had been.

As for tonight . . . she started thinking about the fake séance. She went over it in her mind, because every word, every syllable, seemed burned into her brain. There'd been wickedness there, certainly, the wickedness of cheats and liars. The raising of false hopes, battening on credulity; that's what she'd reacted to. Not the evil the priests had raved about.

But wasn't that just what evil spirits were supposed to do? Who was she, Kaeti cleverbritches, the smart young thing from town, to lay the law down about things she didn't understand? She saw now, far too late, the priests had been much wiser. They'd predicted the results accurately enough; they just hadn't bothered to spell out the means. What had Kerry said about principles? The rows they caused were always petty, but they were principles nonetheless.

She understood, quite suddenly, what the black girl had been trying to tell her. *Because* of her color she'd been hired; *because* of her color she'd been patronized; and so, because of her color she was leaving. They'd been subtle, devious, till in the end, she'd cracked. And in a game like that, the first to crack is the loser.

The rage came at that, fleetingly. *Them.* She'd encountered *them* again. They'd flattened Kerry; now they'd flattened her. As they always did, simply and without effort. She'd lost her job, her friends, Tina, everything; but you could never hit back. Because *they* controlled the world, holding it in the cup of their pudgy, uncaring hands.

She lay rigid, squeezing the hot tears. *"Have I been so bad?"* she whispered. *"Has it all been me! Make something happen,"* she pleaded to anything that would listen. *"I can't stand this. I can't take no more. Make something happen. Please. . . ."*

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* * *

John Porterton-Coleridge sat in the tiny office of the theater, counting the takings one final time. He hadn't believed them at first, but the figure was the same. Over six hundred quid, the best night for weeks. Knock off fifty for the theater, a few pounds for petrol, the odd fiver that had smoothed the way — it still left more than five hundred, and the lion's share was his. But that was as it should be, of course. After all, he'd put the act together in the first place; he was still the mastermind. Who planned the tours? Who made the bookings? Who saw to every detail? It was hard work sometimes, admittedly, but the rewards were there. Always a fresh set of punters, ready with their cash. Three more shows next week, then they'd pull out of the area. As ever, John Porterton-Coleridge was sensitive to portents; and the hounds had begun to bay a little, as they always did in the end. He wasn't a man who believed in meeting trouble halfway; he didn't believe in meeting it at all.

Not that it could always be avoided. That little incident tonight, for example. He'd even been slightly worried himself at one point; for a minute or two, he'd thought he might have to scarper with the cash. But it had been passed off easily enough in the end; the audience, suckers that they were, had rallied to his support. Even congratulated him on his firm handling of things. By the time the police arrived, the session had been under way again, a model of order and decorum. Though of course, things like that were second nature to him; old Thespians were used to playing through minor disruptions. And it all made good copy; the more the do-gooders complained, the more the punters flocked. He glanced lovingly at the thick scrapbook that always traveled with him. By habit, he counted column inches; he'd even started keeping a weekly graph. The total was in the hundreds already, and every word for free. God, but people were fools. He'd hardly believed it himself at first, but he knew now he was invincible. He and his team.

Not that he hadn't been giving that some thought. That old cow Zara was well past her prime; worse, she was going round the twist. She was starting to believe what she was doing, and that was fatal. Holdsworth, of course, he could just drop back in the gutter where he'd found him. He'd been looking out for hopefuls on the quiet; he'd already got one or two lined up. A week or two of training, and the act would be better than ever.

The others had long since gone. They always liked a booze-up after a

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session, and tonight he supposed they'd probably earned it. They trusted him; they were quite happy to let him lock up and do the cash, which was all to the good. It would make it that much easier to cut and run, when he judged the time was ripe.

He patted the little bundles of notes lovingly and began to stow them in his briefcase. By God, this was better than carrying spears at Stratford. He marveled at all the fools who still went on, season after season, year after year, earning next to nothing, living on hope, waiting for the big break that never came. He'd made his own salvation; nobody was taking it from him now.

He looked at his watch. Nearly one o'clock, but of course, the question-and-answer bit had gone on twice as long as usual. He'd felt he had to give the audience extra value for their money; anything was better than having to give returns. He supposed he'd better lock up. Dump the keys at the sweetshop over the way and get on the road; the morning would come far too soon. He yawned, closed the briefcase, and locked it. He stood up and glanced a last time round the office. He put the light off and walked through to the little foyer. All secure; the streetlamps over the road cast funny orange oblongs on the walls. He walked through the auditorium, silent now and dark, checking as he went. He clicked off the little service lights and left by the stage door.

The passage that ran up beside the little theater was dark, so dark that he paused for a moment to allow his eyes to become accustomed to it. The round-topped doorway at the end showed dimly then, lit by the reflection of the lights round the Town Hall. He began to walk toward it briskly, then he stopped and frowned. Just inside the arch a figure was leaning against the wall. He was sure it hadn't been there a second before.

For some reason he felt suddenly uneasy. His back hair tingled; he took a firmer grip of the briefcase and cleared his throat. "You there," he said. "Who are you? What do you want?" He hoped his voice sounded confident and authoritative.

The figure was a mere silhouette. He could make out no details. It didn't answer, but he knew it was watching him.

He took another step forward. "Look," he said, "it's late, and I'm tired. I'm locking up now; you really will have to run along." The words sounded banal even to him; it seemed his rhetoric had quite deserted him. There was something else, too: a blind, unreasoning urge to take to his heels and

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bolt. But there was nowhere to bolt to. Behind him, the end of the little passage was blind; to either side were the high, blank walls of buildings. "Look," he said in a species of weak bluster, "if this is some sort of joke. . . ." A girl's voice spoke then, clear and light. "Do yer want ter see some ghosts?" it said.

He should have been relieved. Just some chit of a kid, and potty with it, it seemed. He wasn't relieved, though; he licked his lips and swallowed. "Look," he said again. "I'm sorry; the show's over. We're playing tomorrow, though, and the day after. I can easily get you tickets if you want. . . ."

His voice tailed off once more, for the girl had moved from where she lounged against the wall. She stood now squarely in his path, hands on hips and feet apart. "You knows all about ghosts?" she said. "Shall I show yer some? Come on," she said cajolingly. "They're waitin' fer yer. . . ."

But it was ridiculous. He, John Porterton-Coleridge, to be cowed by some village idiot. He began to stride toward her. "Get out of my way," he said.

He stopped again, appalled. Because a terrifying thing had happened. Her eyes had begun to glow. They shone bright, and brighter; like twin moons, yet tawny, burning. The eyes of a great cat.

He put his hand up as if to shield his face. He made a low noise in his throat. A second pair of eyes had appeared. Lower and infinitely more terrible. He cried out hoarsely, and she snatched contemptuously at her jacket. Light leaped out at him. The tiger blazed, orange against black, opened its jaws, and gave one low and terrible snarl.

He screamed and ran. He had to get past, get past at any cost. She stepped back, and he blundered into the street. He took one look at what surrounded him, and screamed again. He dropped the case and crouched blubbering again the wall. It seemed that he had entered Hell. The roadway and the path beyond blazed with light, but light of a color he had never seen. Flames bobbed and danced, weaving; through and between them he glimpsed creatures from vilest nightmares. They moaned and flopped and gibbered; there were bones and skulls and offal, mangled trunks and limbs. Behind them capered others and still more; and others coming flocking, converging on him as a focus, filling the air with rushing, whispering. "No," he whimpered. "No, no, no. . . ."

"Come an' meet 'em," yelled the girl. "You knows about 'em; come an' say 'ello. Nothin' ter be scared of; you knows that. All locals, each an' every

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one. . . . This is Charles," she said. "Died in a car crash, steerin' column through 'im. Them things stickin' out 'is back there are 'is lungs. . . ."

John Porterton-Coleridge made an indescribable sound.

"This is Jim," she shouted. "You were talkin' to 'im jus' now. Sorry 'e ain't very tall, but 'e 'ad 'is legs cut orf. . . ." The little boy lurched forward on his knee stumps. Holding his arms up, mewing, leaving a thick crimson trail. The actor-manager tried to hide his face. "An' this is Reg," snarled his tormentor. "Come orf 'is bike, went 'eadfirst in a tree. Bone-dome din' save 'im, though; I reported that an' all. Show 'im, Reg. . . ." The specter tittered, wrenching at its helmet. Snappings and squelchings sounded from inside.

"All in the papers," squealed the girl. "All wrote down, year in, year out. All in the news. Only, we ain't got no red spotlights. We does it fer real. . . ."

"Send them away," whispered Mr. Porterton-Coleridge. "Please send them away. . . ."

"Send 'em away?" said the girl. "You ain't seen 'alf of it yet. 'Ere, Bruno. . . ." The great horse whickered, bright all over with his own blood. His entrails dragged behind him on the ground.

" 'It by a van," said the girl. "Out on the Northerton Road. Sorry about the clouds o' glory. But things like that 'appen, when yer killed. Want some sugar, boy?"

John Porterton-Coleridge began to run. Shielding his head, jinking and swerving, desperate. But fast as he moved, the cloud of horrors moved faster. They were round him now, beating at his shoulders, clutching with fingers that were bone. "Don't be scared," yelled the girl. "They've all Passed Over; they don't mean no 'arm. . . ." Then, in quite a different voice: *"Show 'im what it's really like. Make 'em show 'im, tiger. . . ."*

Hot breath was at his heels. His lungs were rasping; saliva bearded his chin. He'd reached the church. He swerved aside because the light streamed from its windows, too. Music blasted from it, and the whole building was dancing, jigging and lurching to the strains. "Rise up, you lot in there," yelled the girl. "Come on, get with it. It's the day o' Jubilo. . . ."

The river was ahead, and the bridge. The sky above it burned as well, and the water itself was glowing, rolling. He had to get away, though. At all costs, he had to get away. . . . He ran again and dived headlong.

"Welcome," gurgled the new ones. *"Welcome. We see so few fresh faces. Do not be afraid. We were people once, but we Passed Over, too. . . ."*

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They ballooned their swollen gray-white bodies, "*Kiss us,*" they whispered. "*Kiss us. Kiss the drowned. . . .*"

He surfaced desperately, once. Kaeti saw the frothing, and something else. The moon was low, glaring like an amber eye; by its light she saw a figure poised on the parapet of the bridge. A dark-skinned woman, with flowing robes and hair. She laughed, and again, then raised arms that sparkled with jewels. The waves leaped in response; he was pressed down and down to where the mud was thick and cold brown worms waited in their trillions.

Kaeti came out of bed as if propelled by a charge of explosive. "Oh my Gawd," she whispered. "Oh my Gawd. . . ." She fumbled for the light switch, clung to the doorframe, and trembled. She ran to the loo and dropped to her knees by the pedestal. She sicked, worked the handle, and was sick again. She got up, staggered to the handbasin, and turned the tap on full. She splashed water on her head and neck, then put her face in her hands.

" 'Ere," said Tina. "Wot the 'ell you doin', makin' a row like that? What's the matter, Kaeti?"

Things came back into focus. Though there were still spots of color floating about. "Teen," she whispered. "Teen, is it . . . reely you?"

" 'Course not," said the other girl impatiently. "It's Mickey Mouse, in drag. Wot the 'ell got into yer?"

Kaeti swallowed. "Sorry," she said. "Sorry, I 'ad a dream. . . ." She clung to Tina.

"Oh, is that all?" said Tina. "We all gets them. Tell yer some o' mine sometimes, raise yer back 'air. Come on. . . ."

Kaeti allowed herself to be led back to the bedroom. She closed her eyes and suffered the blankets to be tucked round her. "I don' know," said Tina. "Always somethin', these days. No peace fer the wicked. Go ter sleep. . . ." Kaeti felt the bed tilt slightly as she slipped back in.

She sighed. Quite suddenly she felt at peace. As if some great force had really swept the town and left it different. Cleansed somehow, in spite of what she'd seen. She realized, dimly, that her life had changed again; the blackness and fear had gone. Things would sort themselves out; they always had. Tomorrow was another day. Also, her prayers had been answered: Tina was back. Kaeti realized she'd been lying to herself again. Tina'd never have deserted her, not while the other still needed her. She'd

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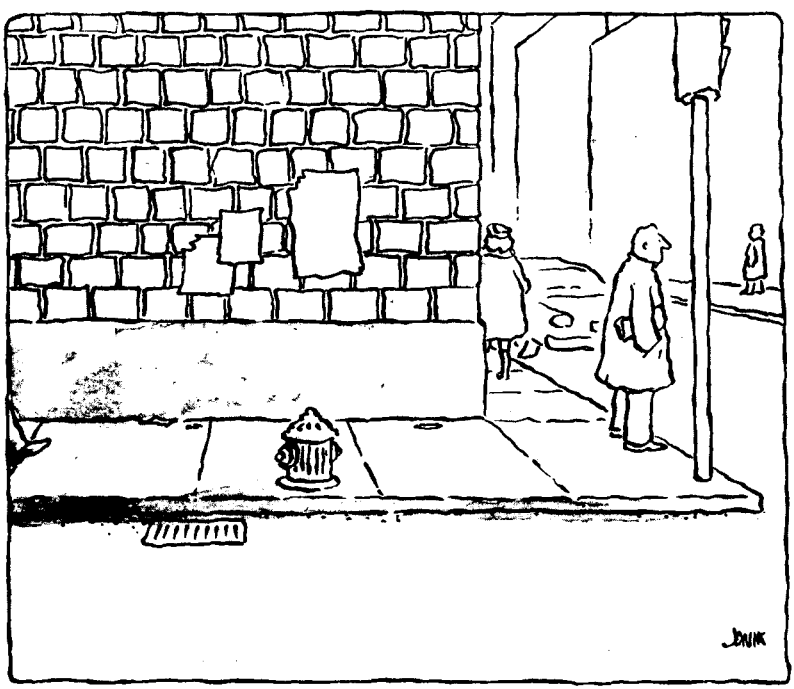
just been hardening herself, against the shock of being alone. But that hadn't happened yet. She wouldn't have to face it, not for a little while....

She turned her head. "Teen?" she said softly. "Teen?" But the other had drifted off again already.

Kaeti looked across the dark, to the corner where the wardrobe stood. She knew now what she had to do. She'd give Tina the sweater, the wonderful tiger sweater. Tina'd be all right then; nobody would dare touch her again. She'd do it in the morning; she could just imagine Tina's face already. Kaeti thought of her wearing it: just the sweater, nothing else at all. She'd be snarling all over then. The image made a bump in the smooth downward curve to sleep.



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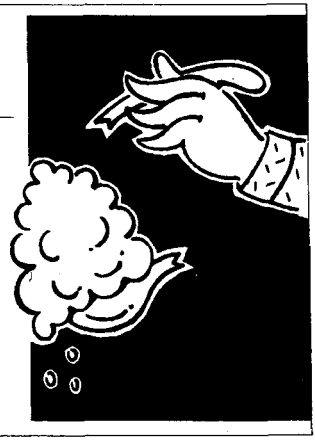

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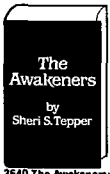

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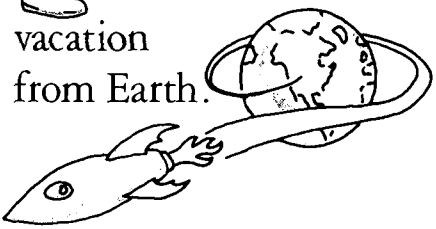

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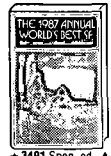

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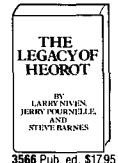

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